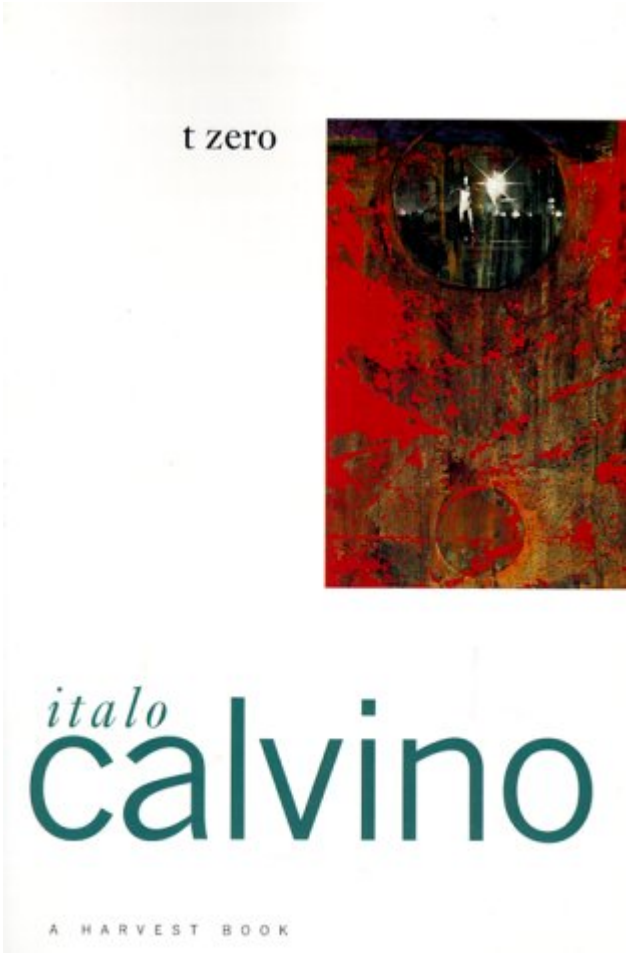

T Zero

Italo Calvino

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Contents

PART ONE

More of Qfwfq

The Soft Moon

The Origin of the Birds

Crystals

Blood, Sea

PART TWO

Priscilla

I. Mitosis

II. Meiosis

III. Death

PART THREE

t zero

t zero

The Chase

The Night Driver

The Count of Monte Cristo

Part One
More of Qfwfq

The Soft Moon

According to the calculations of H. Gerstenkorn, later developed by H. Alfven, the terrestrial continents are simply fragments of the Moon which fell upon our planet. According to this theory, the Moon originally was a planet gravitating around the Sun, until the moment when the nearness of the Earth caused it to be derailed from its orbit. Captured by terrestrial gravity, the Moon moved closer and closer, contracting its orbit around us. At a certain moment the reciprocal attraction began to alter the surface of the two celestial bodies, raising very high waves from which fragments were detached and sent spinning in space, between Earth and Moon, especially fragments of lunar matter which finally fell upon Earth. Later, through the influence of our tides, the Moon was impelled to move away again, until it reached its present orbit. But a part of the lunar mass, perhaps half of it, had remained on Earth, forming the continents.

She was coming closer,—*Qfwfq recalled,*—I noticed it as I was going home, raising my eyes between the walls of glass and steel, and I saw her, no longer a light like all the others that shine in the evening: the ones they light on Earth when at a certain hour they pull down a lever at the power station, or those of the sky, farther away but similar, or at least not out of harmony with the style of all the rest—I speak in the present tense, but I am still referring to those remote times—I saw her breaking away from all the other lights of the sky and the streets, standing out in the concave map of darkness, no longer occupying a point, perhaps a big one on the order of Mars and Venus, like a hole through which the light spreads, but now becoming an out-and-out portion of space, and she was taking form, not yet clearly identifiable because eyes weren't used to identifying it, but also because the outlines weren't sufficiently precise to define a regular figure. Anyway I saw it was becoming a thing.

And it revolted me. Because it was a thing that, though you couldn't understand what it was made of, or perhaps precisely because you couldn't understand, seemed different from all the things in our life, our good things of plastic, of nylon, of chrome-plated steel, duco, synthetic resins, plexiglass, aluminum, vinyl, formica, zinc, asphalt, asbestos, cement, the old things among which we were born and bred. It was something incompatible, extraneous. I saw it approaching as if it were going to slip between the skyscrapers of Madison Avenue (I'm talking about the avenue we had then, beyond comparison with the Madison of today), in that corridor of night sky glowing with light from above the jagged line of the cornices; and it spread out, imposing on our familiar landscape not only its light of an unsuitable color, but also its volume, its weight, its incongruous substantiality. And then, all over the face of the Earth—the surfaces of metal plating, iron armatures, rubber pavements, glass domes—over every part of us that was exposed, I felt a shudder pass.

As fast as the traffic allowed, I went through the tunnel, drove toward the Observatory. Sibyl was there, her eye glued to the telescope. As a rule she didn't like me to visit her during working hours, and the moment she saw me she would make a vexed face; but not that evening: she didn't even look up, it was obvious she was expecting my visit. "Have you seen it?" would have been a stupid question, but I had to bite my tongue to keep from asking it, I was so impatient to know what she thought about it all.

"Yes, the planet Moon has come still closer," Sibyl said, before I had asked her anything, "the phenomenon was foreseen."

I felt a bit relieved. "Do you foresee that it'll move away again?" I asked.

Sibyl still had one eyelid half closed, peering into the telescope. "No," she said, "it won't move away any more."

I didn't understand. "You mean that the Earth and the Moon have become twin planets?"

"I mean the Moon isn't a planet any more and the Earth has a Moon."

Sibyl had a casual way of dismissing matters; it irritated me every time she did it. "What kind of thinking is that?" I complained. "One planet's just as much a planet as the others, isn't it?"

"Would you call this a planet? I mean, a planet the way the Earth's a planet? Look!" And Sibyl moved from the telescope, motioning me to approach it. "The Moon could never manage to become a planet like ours."

I wasn't listening to her explanation: the Moon, enlarged by the telescope, appeared to me in all its details, or rather many of its details appeared to me at once, so mixed up that the more I observed it the less sure I was of how it was made, and I could only vouch for the effect this sight caused in me, an effect of fascinated disgust. First of all, I could note the green veins that ran over it, thicker in certain zones, like a network, but to tell the truth this was the most insignificant detail, the least showy, because what you might call the general properties eluded the grasp of my glance, thanks perhaps to the slightly viscous glistening that transpired from a myriad of pores, one would have said, or opercula, and also in certain points from extended tumefactions of the surface, like buboes or suckers. There, I'm concentrating again on the details, a more picturesque method of description apparently, though in reality of only limited efficiency, because only by considering the details within the whole—such as the swelling of the sublunar pulp which stretched its pale external tissues but made them also fold over on themselves in inlets or recesses looking like scars (so it, this Moon, might also have been made of pieces pressed together and stuck on carelessly)—it is, as I say, only by considering the whole, as in diseased viscera, that the single details can also be considered: for example, a thick forest as of black fur which jutted out of a rift.

"Does it seem right to you that it should go on revolving around the Sun, like us?" Sibyl said. "The Earth is far stronger: in the end it'll shift the Moon from its orbit and make it turn around the Earth. We'll have a satellite."

I was quite careful not to express the anguish I was feeling. I knew how Sibyl reacted in these cases: assuming an attitude of blatant superiority, if not of downright cynicism, acting like a person who is never surprised by anything. She behaved this way to provoke me, I believe (that is, I hope; I would certainly have felt even greater anguish at the thought that she acted out of real indifference).

"And... and..." I started to say, taking care to formulate a question that would show nothing but objective curiosity and yet would force Sibyl to say something to appease my anxiety (so I still hoped for this from her, I still insisted that her calm reassure me), ". . . and will we always have it in sight like this?"

"This is nothing," she answered. "It'll come even closer." And for the first time, she smiled. "Don't you like it? Why, seeing it there like that, so different, so far from any known form, and knowing that it's ours, that the Earth has captured it and is keeping it there ... I don't know, I like it, it seems beautiful to me."

At this point I no longer cared about hiding my mood. "But won't it be dangerous for us?" I asked.

Sibyl tensed her lips in the expression of hers I liked least. "We are on the Earth, the Earth has a force which means it can keep planets around itself, on its own, like the Sun. What can the Moon oppose, in the way of mass, field of gravity, orbit stability, consistency? Surely you don't mean to compare the two? The Moon is all soft, the Earth is hard, solid, the Earth endures." "What about the Moon? If it

doesn't endure?" "Oh, the Earth's force will keep it in its place." I waited till Sibyl had finished her shift at the Observatory, to drive her home. Just outside the city there is that cloverleaf where all the superhighways spread out, rushing over bridges that cross one another in spiral patterns, held up by cement pillars of different heights; you never know in what direction you're going as you follow the white arrows painted on the asphalt, and now and then you find the city you're leaving suddenly facing you, coming closer, patterned with squares of light among the pillars and the curves of the spiral. There was the Moon just above us: and the city seemed fragile to me, suspended like a cobweb, with all its little tinkling panes, its threadlike embroidery of light, under that excrescence that swelled the sky.

Now, I have used the word "excrescence" to indicate the Moon, but I must at once fall back on the same word to describe the new thing I discovered at that moment: namely, an excrescence emerging from that Moon excrescence, stretching toward the Earth like the drip of a candle.

"What's that? What's happening?" I asked, but by now a new curve had set our automobile journeying toward the darkness.

"It's the terrestrial attraction causing solid tides on the Moon's surface," Sibyl said. "What did I tell you? Call that consistency?"

The unwinding of the superhighway brought us again face to face with the Moon, and that candle dripping had stretched still farther toward the Earth, curling at its tip like a mustache hair, and then, as its point of attachment thinned to a peduncle, it had almost the appearance of a mushroom.

We lived in a cottage, in a line with others along one of the many avenues of a vast Green Belt. We sat down as always on the rocking chairs on the porch with a view of the back yard, but this time we didn't look at the half-acre of glazed tiles that formed our share of green space; our eyes were staring above, magnetized by that sort of polyp hanging over us. Because now the Moon's drippings had become numerous, and they extended toward the Earth like slimy tentacles, and each of them seemed about to start dripping in its turn a matter composed of gelatin and hair and mold and slaver.

"Now I ask you, is that any way for a celestial body to disintegrate?" Sibyl insisted. "Now you must realize the superiority of our planet. What if the Moon does come down? Let it come: the time will come also for it to stop. This is the sort of power the Earth's field of gravity has: after it's attracted the Moon almost on top of us, all of a sudden it stops the Moon, carries it back to a proper distance, and keeps it there, making it revolve, pressing it into a compact ball. The Moon has us to thank if it doesn't fall apart completely!"

I found Sibyl's reasoning convincing, because to me, too, the Moon seemed something inferior and revolting; but her words still couldn't relieve my apprehension. I saw the lunar outcrops writhing in the sky with sinuous movements, as if they were trying to reach or enfold something: there was the city, below, where we could see a glow of light on the horizon with the jagged shadow of the skyline. Would it stop in time, the Moon, as Sibyl had said, before one of its tentacles had succeeded in clutching the spire of a skyscraper? And what if, sooner, one of these stalactites that kept stretching and lengthening should break off, plunge down upon us?

"Something may come down," Sibyl admitted, without waiting for a question from me, "but what does that matter? The Earth is all sheathed in waterproof, crush-proof, dirtproof materials; even if a bit of this Moon mush drips onto us, we can clean it up in a hurry."

As if Sibyl's assurance had enabled me to see something that had surely been taking place for a while, I cried: "Look, stuff is coming down!" and I raised my arm to point out a suspension of thick drops of a creamy pap in the air. But at that same moment a vibration came from the Earth, a tinkling; and through the sky, in the direction opposite to the falling clumps of planetary secretion, a very minute flight of solid fragments rose, the scales of the Earth's armor which was being shattered: unbreakable glass and

plates of steel and sheaths of nonconducting material, drawn up by the Moon's attraction as in an eddy of grains of sand.

"Only minimal damage," Sibyl said, "and just on the surface. We can repair the gaps in no time. It's only logical that the capture of a satellite should cost us some losses: but it's worth it, there's simply no comparison!"

That was when we heard the first crack of a lunar meteorite falling to the Earth: a very loud "splat!," a deafening noise and, at the same time, a disgustingly spongy one, which didn't remain alone but was followed by a series of apparently explosive splashes, of flabby whip strokes falling on every side. Before our eyes became accustomed to perceiving what was falling, a little time went by: to tell the truth, I was the slow one because I expected the pieces of the Moon to be luminous too; whereas Sibyl already saw them and commented on them in her contemptuous tone but also with an unusual indulgence: "Soft meteorites, now really, who's ever seen such a thing? Stuff worthy of the Moon ." . . interesting, though, in its way . . ."

One remained stuck on the wire hedge, half crushed under its weight, spilling over on the ground and immediately mixing with it, and I began to see what it was, that is I began to assemble some sensations that would allow me to form a visual image of what I had before me, and then I became aware of other, smaller spots scattered all over the tile pavement: something like a mud of acid mucus which penetrated into the terrestrial strata, or rather a kind of vegetal parasite that absorbed everything it touched, incorporating it into its own gluey pulp, or else like a serum in which colonies of whirling and ravenous micro-organisms were agglomerated, or else a pancreas cut in pieces trying to join together again, opening like suckers the cells of its cut edges, or else . . .

I would have liked to close my eyes and I couldn't; but when I heard Sibyl's voice say: "Of course, I find it revolting too, but when you think that the fact is finally established: the Earth is definitely different and superior and we're on this side, I believe that for a moment we can even enjoy sinking into it, because anyway afterward ..." I wheeled around toward her. Her mouth was open in a smile I had never seen before: a damp smile, slightly animal . . .

The sensation I felt on seeing her like that became confused with the fear caused almost at the same moment by the fall of the great lunar fragment, the one that submerged and destroyed our cottage and the whole avenue and the residential suburb and a great part of the county, in a single, hot, syrupy, stunning blow. After digging through the lunar matter all night, we managed to see the sky again. It was dawn; the storm of meteorites was over; the Earth around us was unrecognizable, covered by a deep layer of mud, a paste of green proliferations and slippery organisms. Of our former terrestrial materials not a trace was visible. The Moon was moving off in the sky, pale, also unrecognizable: narrowing my eyes, I could see it was covered with a thick mass of rubble and shards and fragments, shiny, sharp, clean.

The sequel is familiar. After hundreds of thousands of centuries we are trying to give the Earth its former natural appearance, we are reconstructing the primitive terrestrial crust of plastic and cement and metal and glass and enamel and imitation leather. But what a long way we have to go! For a still incalculable amount of time we will be condemned to sink into the lunar discharge, rotten with cholorophyll and gastric juices and dew and nitrogenous gases and cream and tears. We still have much to do, soldering the shiny and precise plates of the primordial terrestrial sheath until we have erased — or at least concealed—the alien and hostile additions. And with today's materials, too, concocted haphazardly, products of a corrupt Earth, trying in vain to imitate the prime substances, which cannot be equaled.

The true materials, those of the past, are said to be found now only on the Moon, unexploited and lying there in a mess, and they say that for this reason alone it would be worthwhile going there: to recover

them. I don't like to seem the sort who always says disagreeable things, but we all know what state the Moon is in, exposed to cosmic storms, full of holes, corroded, worn. If we go there, we'll only have the disappointment of learning that even our material of the old days—the great reason and proof of terrestrial superiority—was inferior goods, not made to last, which can no longer be used even as scrap. There was a time when I would have been careful not to show suspicions of this sort to Sibyl. But now, when she's fat, disheveled, lazy, greedily eating cream puffs, what can Sibyl say to me, now?

The Origin of the Birds

The appearance of Birds comes relatively late, in the history of evolution, following the emergence of all the other classes of the animal kingdom. The progenitor of the Birds—or at least the first whose traces have been found by paleontologists—is the Archeopteryx (still endowed with certain characteristics of the Reptiles from which he descends), who dates from the Jurassic period, tens of millions of years after the first Mammals. This is the only exception to the successive appearance of animal groups progressively more developed in the zoological scale.

In those days we weren't expecting any more surprises, —*Qfwfq narrated,*—by then it was clear how things were going to proceed. Those who existed, existed; we had to work things out for ourselves: some would go farther, some would remain where they were, and some wouldn't manage to survive. The choice had to be made from a limited number of possibilities.

But instead, one morning I hear some singing, outside, that I have never heard before. Or rather (since we didn't yet know what singing was), I hear something making a sound that nobody has ever made before. I look out. I see an unknown animal singing on a branch. He had wings feet tail claws spurs feathers plumes fins quills beak teeth crop horns crest wattles and a star on his forehead. It was a bird; you've realized that already, but I didn't; they had never been seen before. He sang: "Koaxpf . . . Koaxpf . . . Koaaacch . . . ," he beat his wings, striped with iridescent colors, he rose in flight, he came to rest a bit farther on, resumed his singing.

Now these stories can be told better with strip drawings than with a story composed of sentences one after the other. But to make a cartoon with the bird on the branch and me looking out and all the others with their noses in the air, I would have to remember better how a number of things were made, things I've long since forgotten; first the thing I now call bird, second what I now call I, third the branch, fourth the place where I was looking out, fifth all the others. Of these elements I remember only that they were very different from the way we would draw them now. It's best for you to try on your own to imagine the series of cartoons with all the little figures of the characters in their places, against an effectively outlined background, but you must try at the same time not to imagine the figures, or the background either. Each figure will have its little balloon with the words it says, or with the noises it makes, but there's no need for you to read everything written there letter for letter, you only need a general idea, according to what I'm going to tell you.

To begin with, you can read a lot of exclamation marks and question marks spurting from our heads, and these mean we were looking at the bird full of amazement—festive amazement, with desire on our part also to sing, to imitate that first warbling, and to jump, to see the bird rise in flight—but also full of consternation, because the existence of birds knocked our traditional way of thinking into a cocked hat.

In the strip that follows, you see the wisest of us all, old U(h), who moves from the group of the others and says: "Don't look at him! He's a mistake!" and he holds out his hands as if he wanted to cover the eyes of those present. "Now I'll erase him!" he says, or thinks, and to depict this desire of his we could have him draw a diagonal line across the frame. The bird flaps his wings, eludes the diagonal, and flies to safety in the opposite corner. U(h) is happy because, with that diagonal line between them, he can't

see the bird any more. The bird pecks at the line, breaks it, and flies at old U(h). Old U(h), to erase him, tries to draw a couple of crossed lines over him. At the point where the two lines meet, the bird lights and lays an egg. Old U(h) pulls the lines from under him, the egg falls, the bird darts off. There is one frame all stained with egg yolk.

I like telling things in cartoon form, but I would have to alternate the action frames with idea frames, and explain for example this stubbornness of U(h)'s in not wanting to admit the existence of the bird. So imagine one of those little frames all filled with writing, which are used to bring you up to date on what went before: *After the failure of the Pterosauria, for millions and millions of years all trace of animals with wings had been lost.*("Except for Insects," a footnote can clarify.)

The question of winged creatures was considered closed by now. Hadn't we been told over and over that everything capable of being born from the Reptiles had been born? In the course of millions of years there was no form of living creature that hadn't had its opportunity to come forth, populate the earth, and then—in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred—decline and vanish. On this point we were all agreed: the remaining species were the only deserving ones, destined to give life to more and more highly selected progeny, better suited to their surroundings. For some time we had been tormented by doubts as to who was a monster and who wasn't, but that too could be considered long settled: all of us who existed were nonmonsters, while the monsters were all those who could exist and didn't, because the succession of causes and effects had clearly favored us, the nonmonsters, rather than them.

But if we were going to begin again with strange animals, if the Reptiles, antiquated as they were, started to pull out limbs and teguments they had never felt any need for previously, in other words if a creature impossible by definition such as a bird was instead possible (and what's more if it could be a handsome bird like this one, pleasing to the sight when he poised on the fern leaves, and to the hearing when he released his warbling), then the barrier between monsters and non-monsters was exploded and everything was possible again.

The bird flew far off. (In the drawing you see a black shadow against the clouds in the sky: not because the bird is black but because that's the way distant birds are drawn.) And I ran after him. (You see me from behind, as I enter a vast landscape of mountains and forests.) Old U(h) is shouting at me: "Come back, Qfwfq!"

I crossed unfamiliar zones. More than once I thought I was lost (in the drawing it only has to be depicted once), but then I would hear a "Koaxpf ..." and, raising my eyes, I would see the bird perched on a plant, as if he were waiting for me.

Following him like that, I reached a spot where the bushes blocked my view. I opened a path for myself: beneath my feet I saw the void. The earth ended there; I was balanced on the brink. (The spiral line rising from my head represents my dizziness.) Below, nothing could be seen: a few clouds. And the bird, in that void, went flying off, and every now and then he twisted his neck toward me as if inviting me to follow him. Follow him where, when there was nothing farther on?

And then from the white distance a shadow rose, like a horizon of mist, which gradually became clearer, with more distinct outlines. It was a continent, coming forward in the void: you could see its shores, its valleys, its heights, and already the bird was flying above them. But what bird? He was no longer alone, the whole sky over there was a flapping of wings of every color and every form.

Leaning out from the brink of our earth, I watched the continent drift toward me. "It's crashing into us!" I shouted, and at that moment the ground trembled. (A "bang!" written in big letters.) The two worlds, having touched, bounced apart again, then were rejoined, then separated once more. In one of these clashes I found myself flung to the other side, while the empty abyss yawned again and separated me from my world.

I looked around: I didn't recognize anything. Trees, crystals, animals, grasses—everything was different. Not only did birds inhabit the branches, but so did fish (after a manner of speaking) with spiders' legs or (you might say) worms with feathers. Now it's not that I want to describe to you the forms of life over there; imagine them any way you can, more or less strange, it doesn't much matter. What matters is that around me there were displayed all the forms the world could have taken in its transformations but instead hadn't taken, for some casual reason or for some basic incompatibility: the rejected forms, unusable, lost.

(To give an idea this strip of drawings should be done in negative: with figures not unlike the others but in white on black; or else upside down—assuming that it can be decided, for any of these figures, which is up and which is down.)

Alarm froze my bones (in the cartoon, drops of cold sweat spurt from my figure) at seeing those images, all of them in some way familiar and all in some way distorted in their proportions or their combinations (my very tiny figure in white, superimposed on the black shadows that occupy the whole frame), but I couldn't refrain from exploring eagerly all around me. You would have said that my gaze, rather than avoid those monsters, sought them out, as if to be convinced they weren't monsters entirely, and at a certain point my horror was replaced by a not unpleasant sensation (represented in the drawing by luminous rays crossing the black background): beauty existed even there, if one could recognize it.

This curiosity had led me away from the coast, and I moved among hills that were spiky like enormous sea urchins. By now I was lost in the heart of the unknown continent. (The figure that represents me has become minuscule.) The birds, which a short time before had been for me the strangest of apparitions, were already becoming the most familiar of presences. There were so many that they formed a kind of dome around me, raising and lowering their wings all together (frame crammed with birds; my outline barely glimpsed). Others were resting on the ground, perched on the bushes, and gradually as I advanced they moved. Was I their prisoner? I turned to run off, but I was surrounded by walls of birds who left me no passage, except in one direction. They were driving me where they wanted, all their movements were leading me to one point. What was there, at the end? I could discern only a kind of enormous egg lying on its side, which opened slowly, like a shell.

All of a sudden it was flung open. I smiled. My eyes filled with tears of emotion. (I'm depicted alone, in profile; what I'm looking at remains outside the frame.) Before me there was a creature of a beauty never seen before. A *different* beauty, which couldn't be compared to all the forms in which we had recognized beauty (in the frame it is still placed in such a way that only I have it before me, not the reader), and yet*ours,* the most *ours* thing of our world (in the frame a symbolical depiction could be used: a feminine hand, or a foot, or a breast, emerging from a great cloak of feathers); without it our world would always have lacked something. I felt I had arrived at the point where everything converged (an eye could be drawn, an eye with long radial lashes which are transformed into a vortex) and where I was about to be swallowed (or a mouth, the parting of two finely drawn lips, tall as I, and me flying, sucked toward the tongue rising from the darkness).

All around me, birds: flapping of beaks, wings that flutter, claws extended, and the cry: "Koaxpf . . . Koaxpf. . . . Koaaacch. . ."

"Who are you?" I asked.

A title explains: *Qfwfq before the beautiful Org-Onir-Ornit-Or,* and makes my question pointless; the balloon that contains it is covered by another, also rising from my mouth, with the words "I love you!"—an equally superfluous affirmation—promptly followed by another balloon containing the question: "Are you a prisoner?" to which I don't await an answer, and in a fourth balloon which makes its way among the others I add, "I'll rescue you. Tonight we'll flee together."

The following strip is entirely dedicated to the preparations for the flight, to the sleep of the birds and the monsters in a night illuminated by an unknown firmament. A dark little frame, and my voice: "Are you following me?" Or's voice answered: "Yes."

Here you can imagine for yourselves a series of adventurous strips: *Qfwfq and Or in flight across the Continent of the Birds.* Alarms, pursuit, dangers: I leave these to you. To tell the story I should somehow describe what Or was like; and I can't. Imagine a figure somehow towering over mine, but which I somehow hide and protect.

We reached the edge of the chasm. It was dawn. The sun was rising, pale, to reveal our continent now disappearing in the distance. How were we to reach it? I turned toward Or: Or opened her wings. (You hadn't noticed she had them, in the previous frames: two wings broad as sails.) I clung to her cloak. Or flew.

In the next cartoons Or is seen flying among the clouds, with my head peeping out from her bosom. Then, a triangle of little black triangles in the sky: a swarm of birds pursuing us. We are still in the midst of the void; our continent is approaching, but the swarm is faster. They are birds of prey, with curved beaks, fiery eyes. If Or is quick to reach Earth, we will be among our own kind, before the raptors can attack us. Hurry, Or, a few more flaps of your wings: in the next strip we can reach safety.

Not a chance: now the swarm has surrounded us. Or is flying among the raptors (a little white triangle drawn in another triangle full of little black triangles). We are flying over my village: Or would have only to fold her wings and let herself drop, and we would be free. But Or continues flying high, along with the birds. I shouted: "Or, move lower!" She opened her cloak and let me fall. ("Plop!") The swarm, with Or in their midst, turns in the sky, goes back, becomes tiny on the horizon. I find myself flat on the ground, alone.

(Title: *During Qfwfq's absence, many changes had taken place.)* Since the existence of birds had been discovered, the ideas that governed our world had come to a crisis. What everyone had thought he understood before, the simple and regular way in which things were as they were, was no longer valid; in other words: this was nothing but one of the countless possibilities; nobody excluded the possibility that things could proceed in other, entirely different ways. You would have said that now each individual was ashamed of being the way he was expected to be, and was making an effort to show some irregular, unforeseen aspect: a slightly more birdlike aspect, or if not exactly birdlike, at least sufficiently so to keep him from looking out of place alongside the strangeness of the birds. I no longer recognized my neighbors. Not that they were much changed: but those who had some inexplicable characteristic which they had formerly tried to conceal now put it on display. And they all looked as if they were expecting something any moment: not the punctual succession of causes and effects as in the past, but the unexpected.

I couldn't get my bearings. The others thought I had stuck to the old ideas, to the time before the birds; they didn't understand that to me their birdish whims were only laughable: I had seen much more than that, I had visited the world of the things that could have been, and I couldn't drive it from my mind. And I had known the beauty kept prisoner in the heart of that world, the beauty lost for me and for all of us, and I had fallen in love with it.

I spent my days on the top of a mountain, gazing at the sky in case a bird flew across it. And on the peak of another mountain nearby there was old U(h), also looking at the sky. Old U(h) was still considered the wisest of us all, but his attitude toward the birds had changed.

He believed the birds were no longer a mistake, but the truth, the only truth of the world. He had taken to interpreting the birds' flight, trying to read the future in it.

"Seen anything?" he shouted to me, from his mountain.

"Nothing in sight," I said.

"There's one!" we would shout at times, he or I.

"Where was it coming from? I didn't have time to see from what part of the sky it appeared. Tell me: where from?" he asked, all breathless. U(h) drew his auguries from the source of the flight.

Or else it was I who asked: "What direction was it flying in? I didn't see it! Did it vanish over here or over there?" because I hoped the birds would show me the way to reach Or.

There's no use my telling you in detail the cunning I used to succeed in returning to the Continent of the Birds. In the strips it would be told with one of those tricks that work well only in drawings. (The frame is empty. I arrive. I spread paste on the upper right-hand corner. I sit down in the lower left-hand corner. A bird enters, flying, from the left, at the top. As he leaves the frame, his tail becomes stuck. He keeps flying and pulls after him the whole frame stuck to his tail, with me sitting at the bottom, allowing myself to be carried along. Thus I arrive at the Land of the Birds. If you don't like this story you can think up another one: the important thing is to have me arrive there.)

I arrived and I felt my arms and legs clutched. I was surrounded by birds; one had perched on my head, one was pecking at my neck. "Qfwfq, you're under arrest! We've caught you, at last!" I was shut up in a cell.

"Will they kill me?" I asked the jailer bird.

"Tomorrow you'll be tried and then you'll know," he said, perched on the bars.

"Who's going to judge me?"

"The Queen of the Birds."

The next day I was led into the throne room. But I had seen before that enormous shell-egg that was opening. I started.

"Then you're not a prisoner of the birds!" I exclaimed.

A beak dug into my neck. "Bow down before Queen Org-Onir-Ornit-Or!"

Or made a sign. All the birds stopped. (In the drawing you see a slender, beringed hand which rises from an arrangement of feathers.)

"Marry me and you'll be safe," Or said.

Our wedding was celebrated. I can't tell you anything about this either: the only thing that's remained in my memory is a feathery flutter of iridescent images. Perhaps I was paying for my happiness by renouncing any understanding of what I was living through.

I asked Or.

"I would like to understand."

"What?"

"Everything, all this." I gestured toward my surroundings.

"You'll understand when you've forgotten what you understood before."

Night fell. The shell-egg served both as throne and as nuptial bed.

"Have you forgotten?"

"Yes. What? I don't know what, I don't remember anything."

(Frame of Qfwfq's thoughts: *No, I still remember, I'm about to forget everything, but I'm forcing myself to remember!)*

"Come."

We lay down together.

(Frame of Qfwfq's thoughts: *I'm forgetting . . . It's beautiful to forget . . . No, I want to remember . . . I want to forget and remember at the same time . . . Just another second and I feel I'll have forgotten . . . Wait . . . Oh!* An explosion marked with the word "Flash!" or else "Eureka!" in capital letters.)

For a fraction of a second between the loss of everything I knew before and the gain of everything I would know afterward, I managed to embrace in a single thought the world of things as they were and of things as they could have been, and I realized that a single system included all. The world of birds, of monsters, of Or's beauty was the same as the one where I had always lived, which none of us had understood wholly.

"Or! I understand! You! How beautiful! Hurrah!" I exclaimed and I sat up in the bed.

My bride let out a cry.

"Now I'll explain it to you!" I said, exultant. "Now I'll explain everything to everyone!"

"Be quiet!" Or shouted. "You must be quiet!"

"The world is single and what exists can't be explained without ..." I proclaimed. Now she was over me, she was trying to suffocate me (in the drawing: a breast crushing me): "Be quiet! Be quiet!"

Hundreds of beaks and claws were tearing the canopy of the nuptial bed. The birds fell upon me, but beyond their wings I could recognize my native landscape, which was becoming fused with the alien continent.

"There's no difference. Monsters and nonmonsters have always been close to one another! What hasn't been continues to be..." — I was speaking not only to the birds and the monsters but also to those I had always known, who were rushing in on every side.

"Qfwfq! You've lost me! Birds! He's yours!" and the Queen pushed me away.

Too late, I realized how the birds' beaks were intent on separating the two worlds that my revelation had united. "No, wait, don't move away, the two of us together, Or . . . where are you?" I was rolling in the void among scraps of paper and feathers.

(The birds, with beaks and claws, tear up the page of strips. Each flies off with a scrap of printed paper in his beak. The page below is also covered with strip drawings; it depicts the world as it was before the birds' appearance and its successive, predictable developments. I'm among the others, with a bewildered look. In the sky there are still birds, but nobody pays attention to them any more.)

Of what I understood then, I've now forgotten everything. What I've told you is all I can reconstruct, with the help of conjectures in the episodes with the most gaps. I have never stopped hoping that the birds might one day take me back to Queen Or. But are they real birds, these ones that have remained in our midst? The more I observe them, the less they suggest what I would like to remember. (The last strip is all photographs: a bird, the same bird in close-up, the head of the bird enlarged, a detail of the head, the eye . . .)

Crystals

If the substances that made up the terrestrial globe in its incandescent state had had at their disposal a period of time long enough to allow them to grow cold and also sufficient freedom of movement, each of them would have become separated from the others in a single, enormous crystal.

It could have been different, I know,—*Qfwfq remarked,* —you're telling me: I believed so firmly in that world of crystal that was supposed to come forth that I can't resign myself to living still in this world, amorphous and crumbling and gummy, which has been our lot, instead. I run all the time like everybody else, I take the train each morning (I live in New Jersey) to slip into the cluster of prisms I see emerging beyond the Hudson, with its sharp cusps; I spend my days there, going up and down the horizontal and vertical axes that crisscross that compact solid, or along the obligatory routes that graze its sides and its edges. But I don't fall into the trap: I know they're making me run among smooth transparent walls and between symmetrical angles so I'll believe I'm inside a crystal, so I'll recognize a regular form there, a rotation axis, a constant in the dihedrons, whereas none of all this exists. The contrary exists: glass, those are glass solids that flank the streets, not crystal, it's a paste of haphazard molecules which has invaded and cemented the world, a layer of suddenly chilled lava, stiffened into forms imposed from the outside, whereas inside it's magma just as in the Earth's incandescent days.

I don't pine for them surely, those days: I feel discontented with things as they are, but if, for that reason, you expect me to remember the past with nostalgia, you're mistaken. It was horrible, the Earth without any crust, an eternal incandescent winter, a mineral bog, with black swirls of iron and nickel that dripped down from every crack toward the center of the globe, and jets of mercury that gushed up in high spurts. We made our way through a boiling haze, Vug and I, and we could never manage to touch a solid point. A barrier of liquid rocks that we found before us would suddenly evaporate in our path, disintegrating into an acid cloud; we would rush to pass it, but already we could feel it condensing and striking us like a storm of metallic rain, swelling the thick waves of an aluminum ocean. The substance of things changed around us every minute; the atoms, that is, passed from one state of disorder to another state of disorder and then another still: or rather, practically speaking, everything remained always the same. The only real change would have been the atoms' arranging themselves in some sort of order: this is what Vug and I were looking for, moving in the mixture of the elements without any points of reference, without a before or an after.

Now the situation is different, I admit: I have a wrist watch, I compare the angle of its hands with the angle of all the hands I see; I have an engagement book where the hours of my business appointments are marked down; I have a checkbook on whose stubs I add and subtract numbers. At Penn Station I get off the train, I take the subway, I stand and grasp the strap with one hand to keep my balance while I hold my newspaper up in the other, folded so I can glance over the figures of the stock market quotations: I play the game, in other words, the game of pretending there's an order in the dust, a regularity in the system, or an interpenetration of different systems, incongruous but still measurable, so that every graininess of disorder coincides with the faceting of an order which promptly crumbles.

Before it was worse, of course. The world was a solution of substances where everything was dissolved into everything and the solvent of everything. Vug and I kept on getting lost in its midst, losing our lost places, where we had been lost always, without any idea of what we could have found (or of what could have found us) so as to be lost no more.

We realized it all of a sudden. Vug said: "There!"

She was pointing, in the midst of a lava flow, at something that was taking form. It was a solid with regular, smooth facets and sharp corners; and these facets and corners were slowly expanding, as if at the expense of the surrounding matter, and also the form of the solid was changing, while still maintaining symmetrical proportions . . . And it wasn't only the form that was distinct from all the rest:

it was also the way the light entered inside, passing through it and refracted by it. Vug said: "They shine! Lots of them!"

It wasn't the only one, in fact. On the incandescent expanse where once only ephemeral gas bubbles had risen, expelled from the Earth's bowels, cubes now were coming to the surface and octahedrons, prisms, figures so transparent they seemed airy, empty inside, but instead, as we soon saw, they concentrated in themselves an incredible compactness and hardness. The sparkle of this angled blossoming was invading the Earth, and Vug said: "It's spring!" I kissed her.

Now you can understand me: if I love order, it's not —as with so many others—the mark of a character subjected to an inner discipline, a repression of the instincts. In me the idea of an absolutely regular world, symmetrical and methodical, is associated with that first impulse and burgeoning of nature, that amorous tension —what you call eros—while all the rest of your images, those that according to you associate passion with disorder, love with intemperate overflow—river fire whirlpool volcano—for me are memories of nothingness and listlessness and boredom.

It was a mistake on my part, it didn't take me long to understand that. Here we are at the point of arrival: Vug is lost; of the diamond eros only dust remains; the simulated crystal that imprisons me now is base glass. I follow the arrows on the asphalt, I line up at the traffic light, and I start again (today I came into New York by car) when the green comes on (as I do every Wednesday because I take) shifting into first (Dorothy to her psychoanalyst), I try to maintain a steady speed which allows me to pass all the green lights on Second Avenue. This, which you call order, is a threadbare patch over disintegration; I found a parking space but in two hours I'll have to go down again to put another coin in the meter; if I forget they'll tow my car away.

I dreamed of a world of crystal, in those days: I didn't dream it, I saw it, an indestructible frozen springtime of quartz. Polyhedrons grew up, tall as mountains, diaphanous: the shadow of the person beyond pierced through their thickness. "Vug, it's you!" To reach her I flung myself against walls smooth as mirrors; I slipped back; I clutched the edges, wounding myself; I ran along treacherous perimeters, and at every turn there was a different light—diffused, milky, opaque—that the mountain contained.

"Where are you?"

"In the woods!"

The silver crystals were filiform trees, with branches at every right angle. Skeletal fronds of tin and of lead thickened the forest in a geometric vegetation.

In the middle there was Vug, running. "Qfwfq! It's different over there!" she cried. "Gold, green, blue!"

A valley of beryllium opened out, surrounded by ridges of every color, from aquamarine to emerald. I followed Vug with my spirit torn between happiness and fear: happiness at seeing how every substance that made up the world was finding its definitive and solid form, and a still vague fear that this triumph of order in such various fashions might reproduce on another scale the disorder we had barely left behind us. A total crystal I dreamed, a topaz world that would leave out nothing: I was impatient for our Earth to detach itself from the wheel of gas and dust in which all the celestial bodies were whirling, ours should be the first to escape that useless dispersal which is the universe.

Of course, if he chooses, a person can also take it into his head to find an order in the stars, the galaxies, an order in the lighted windows of the empty skyscrapers where between nine and midnight the cleaning women wax the floors of the offices. Rationalize, that's the big task: rationalize if you don't want everything to come apart. Tonight we're dining in town, in a restaurant on the terrace of a twenty-fourth floor. It's a business dinner: there are six of us; there is also Dorothy, and the wife of

Dick Bemberg. I eat some oysters, I look at a star that's called (if I have the right one) Betelgeuse. We make conversation: we husbands talk about production; the ladies, about consumption. Anyway, seeing the firmament is difficult: the lights of Manhattan spread out a halo that becomes mixed with the luminosity of the sky.

The wonder of crystals is the network of atoms that is constantly repeated: this is what Vug wouldn't understand. What she liked—I quickly realized—was to discover in crystals some differences, even minimal ones, irregularities, flaws.

"But what does one atom out of place matter to you, an exfoliation that's a bit crooked," I said, "in a solid that's destined to be enlarged infinitely according to a regular pattern? It's the single crystal we're working toward, the gigantic crystal . . ."

"I like them when there're lots of little ones," she said. To contradict me, surely; but also because it was true that crystals were popping up by the thousands at the same time and were interpenetrating one another, arresting their growth where they came in contact, and they never succeeded in taking over entirely the liquid rock from which they received their form: the world wasn't tending to be composed into an ever-simpler figure but was clotting in a vitreous mass from which prisms and octahedrons and cubes seemed to be struggling to be free, to draw all the matter to themselves . . .

A crater exploded: a cascade of diamonds spread out.

"Look! Aren't they big?" Vug exclaimed.

On every side there were erupting volcanoes: a continent of diamond refracted the sun's light in a mosaic of rainbow chips.

"Didn't you say the smaller they are the more you like them?" I reminded her.

"No! Those enormous ones—I want them!" and she darted off.

"There are still bigger ones," I said, pointing above us. The sparkle was blinding: I could already see a mountain-diamond, a faceted and iridescent chain, a gem-plateau, a Koh-i-noor-Himalaya.

"What can I do with them? I like the ones that can be picked up. I want to have them!" and in Vug there was already the frenzy of possession.

"The diamond will have us, instead. It's the stronger," I said.

I was mistaken, as usual: the diamond was had, not by us. When I walk past Tiffany's, I stop to look at the windows, I contemplate the diamond prisoners, shards of our lost kingdom. They lie in velvet coffins, chained with silver and platinum; with my imagination and my memory I enlarge them, I give them again the gigantic dimensions of fortress, garden, lake, I imagine Vug's pale blue shadow mirrored there. I'm not imagining it: it really is Vug who now advances among the diamonds. I turn: it's the girl looking into the window over my shoulder, from beneath the hair falling across her forehead.

"Vug!" I say. "Our diamonds!"

She laughs.

"Is it really you?" I ask. "What's your name?"

She gives me her telephone number.

We are among slabs of glass: I live in simulated order, I would like to say to her, I have an office on the East Side, I live in New Jersey, for the weekend Dorothy has invited the Bembergs, against simulated order simulated disorder is impotent, diamond would be necessary, not for us to possess it but for it to possess us, the free diamond in which Vug and I were free . . .

"I'll call you," I say to her, only out of the desire to resume my arguing with her.

In an aluminum crystal, where chance scatters some chrome atoms, the transparency is colored a dark red: so the rubies flowered beneath our footsteps.

"You see?" Vug said. "Aren't they beautiful?"

We couldn't walk through a valley of rubies without starting to quarrel again.

"Yes," I said, "because the regularity of the hexagon...."

"Uff!" she said. "Would they be rubies without the intrusion of extraneous atoms? Answer me that!"

I became angry. More beautiful? Or less beautiful? We could go on arguing to infinity, but the only sure fact was that the Earth was moving in the direction of Vug's preferences. Vug's world was in the fissures, the cracks where lava rises, dissolving the rock and mixing the minerals in unpredictable concretions. Seeing her caress walls of granite, I regretted what had been lost in that rock, the exactness of the feldspars, the micas, the quartzes. Vug seemed to take pleasure only in noting how minutely variegated the face of the world appeared. How could we understand each other? For me all that mattered was homogeneous growth, indiscerptibility, achieved serenity; for her, everything had to be separation and mixture, one or the other, or both at once. Even the two of us had to take on an aspect (we still possessed neither form nor future): I imagined a slow uniform expansion, following the crystals' example, until the me-crystal would have interpenetrated and fused with the her-crystal and perhaps together we would have become a unity within the world-crystal; she already seemed to know that the law of living matter would be infinite separating and rejoining. Was it Vug, then, who was right?

It's Monday; I telephone her. It's almost summer already. We spend a day together, on Staten Island, lying on the beach. Vug watches the grains of sand trickle through her fingers.

"All these tiny crystals..." she says.

The shattered world that surrounds us is, for her, still the world of the past, the one we expected to be born from the incandescent world. To be sure, the crystals still give the world form, breaking up, being reduced to almost imperceptible fragments rolled by the waves, encrusted with all the elements dissolved in the sea which kneads them together again in steep cliffs, in sandstone reefs, a hundred times dissolved and recomposed, in schists, slates, marbles of glabrous whiteness, simulacra of what they once could have been and now can never be.

And again I am gripped by my stubbornness as I was when it began to be clear that the game was lost, that the Earth's crust was becoming a congeries of disparate forms, and I didn't want to resign myself, and at every irregularity in the porphyry that Vug happily pointed out to me, at every vitrescence that emerged from the basalt, I wanted to persuade myself that these were only apparent flaws, that they were all part of a much vaster regular structure, in which every asymmetry we thought we observed really corresponded to a network of symmetries so complicated we couldn't comprehend it, and I tried to calculate how many billions of sides and dihedral corners this labyrinthine crystal must have, this hypercrystal that included within itself crystals and non-crystals.

Vug has brought a little transistor radio along to the beach with her.

"Everything comes from crystal," I say, "even the music we're hearing." But I know full well that the transistor's crystal is imperfect, flawed, veined with impurities, with rents in the warp of the atoms.

She says: "It's an obsession with you." And it is our old quarrel, continuing. She wants to make me admit that real order carries impurity within itself, destruction.

The boat lands at the Battery, it is evening; in the illuminated network of the skyscraper-prisms I now look only at the dark rips, the gaps. I see Vug home; I go up with her. She lives downtown, she has a photography studio. As I look around I see nothing but perturbations of the order of the atoms: luminescent tubes, TV, the condensing of tiny silver crystals on the photographic plates. I open the icebox, I take out the ice for our whisky. From the transistor comes the sound of a saxophone. The crystal which has succeeded in becoming the world, in making the world transparent to itself, in refracting it into infinite spectral images, is not mine: it is a corroded crystal, stained, mixed. The victory of the crystals (and of Vug) has been the same thing as their defeat (and mine). I'll wait now till the Thelonius Monk record ends, then I'll tell her.

Blood, Sea

The conditions that obtained when life had not yet emerged from the oceans have not subsequently changed a great deal for the cells of the human body, bathed by the primordial wave which continues to flow in the arteries. Our blood in fact has a chemical composition analogous to that of the sea of our origins, from which the first living cells and the first multicellular beings derived the oxygen and the other elements necessary to life. With the evolution of more complex organisms, the problem of maintaining a maximum number of cells in contact with the liquid environment could not be solved simply by the expansion of the exterior surface: those organisms endowed with hollow structures, into which the sea water could flow, found themselves at an advantage. But it was only with the ramification of these cavities into a system of blood circulation that distribution of oxygen was guaranteed to the complex of cells, thus making terrestrial life possible. The sea where living creatures were at one time immersed is now enclosed within their bodies.

Basically not much has changed: I swim, I continue swimming in the same warm sea,—*Qjwfq said,*— or rather, the inside isn't changed, what was formerly the outside, where I used to swim under the sun, and where I now swim in darkness, is inside; what's changed is the outside, the present outside, which was the inside before, that's changed all right; however, it doesn't matter very much. I say it doesn't matter very much and you promptly reply: What do you mean, the outside doesn't matter much? What I mean is that if you look at it more closely, from the point of view of the old outside, that is from the present inside, what is the present outside? It's simply where it's dry, where there is no flux or reflux, and as far as mattering goes, of course, that matters too, inasmuch as it's the outside, since it's been on the outside, since that outside has been outside, and people believe it's more deserving of consideration than the inside. When all is said and done, however, even when it was inside it mattered, though in a more restricted range or so it seemed then. This is what I mean: less deserving of consideration. Well, let's start talking right now about the others, those who are not I, our neighbor: we know our neighbor exists because he's outside, agreed? Outside like the present outside. But before, when the outside was what we swam in, the very dense and very warm ocean, even then there were the others, slippery things, in that old outside, which is like the present inside, and so it is now when I've changed places and given the wheel to Signor Cècere, at the Codogno service station, and in front, next to him, Jenny Fumagalli has taken the passenger's seat, and I've moved in back with Zylphia: the outside, what is the outside? A dry environment, lacking in meaning, a bit crammed (there are four of us in a Volkswagen), where all is indifferent and interchangeable, Jenny Fumagalli, Codogno, Signor Cècere, the service station, and as far as Zylphia is concerned, at the moment when I placed my hand on her knee, at perhaps 15 kilometers from Casalpusterlengo, or else she was the one who started touching me, I don't remember, since outside events tend to be confused, what I felt, I mean the sensation that came from outside, was really a weak business compared to what went through my blood and to what I have felt ever since then, since the time when we were swimming together in the same torrid, blazing ocean,

Zylphia and I. The underwater depths were red like the color we see now only inside our eyelids, and the sun's rays penetrated to brighten them in flashes or else in sprays. We undulated with no sense of direction, drawn by an obscure current so light that it seemed downright impalpable and yet strong enough to drag us up in very high waves and down in their troughs. Zylphia would plunge headlong beneath me in a violet, almost black whirlpool, then soar over me rising toward the more scarlet stripes that ran beneath the luminous vault. We felt all this through the layers of our former surface dilated to maintain the most extended possible contact with that nourishing sea, because at every up and down of the waves there was stuff that passed from outside of us to our inside, all sustenance of every sort, even iron, healthful stuff, in short, and in fact I've never been so well as I was then. Or, to be more precise: I was well since in dilating my surface I increased the possibilities of contact between me and this outside of me that was so precious, but as the zones of my body soaked in marine solution were extended, my volume also increased at the same time, and a more and more voluminous zone within me became unreachable by the element outside, it became arid, dull, and the weight of this dry and torpid thickness I carried within me was the only shadow on my happiness, our happiness, Zylphia's and mine, because the more she splendidly took up space in the sea, the more the inert and opaque thickness grew in her too, unlaved and unlavable, lost to the vital flux, not reached by the messages I transmitted to her through the vibration of the waves. So perhaps I could say I'm better off now than I was then, now that the layers of our former surface, then stretched on the outside, have been turned inside out like a glove, now that all the outside has been turned inward and has entered and pervaded us through filiform ramifications, yes, I could really say this, were it not for the fact that the dull arid zone has been projected outward, has expanded to the extent of the distance between my tweed suit and the fleeting landscape of the Lodi plain, and it surrounds me, swollen with undesired presences such as Signor Cècere's, with all the thickness that Signor Cècere, formerly, would have enclosed within himself—in his foolish manner of dilating uniformly like a ball—now unfolded before me in a surface unsuitably irregular and detailed, especially in his pudgy neck dotted with pimples, taut in his half-starched collar at this moment when he is saying: "Oh, you two on the back seat!" and he has slightly shifted the rear-view mirror and has certainly glimpsed what our hands are doing, mine and Zylphia's, our diminutive outside hands, our diminutively sensitive hands that pursue the memory of ourselves swimming, or rather our swimming memory, or rather the presence of what in me and Zylphia continues swimming or being swum, together, as then.

This is a distinction I might bring up to give a clearer idea of before and now: before, we swam, and now we are swum. But on sober reflection I prefer not to go into this, because in reality even when the sea was outside I swam in it the same way I do now, without any intervention of my will, that is to say I was swum even then, no more nor less than now, there was a current that enfolded me and carried me this way and that, a gentle and soft fluid, in which Zylphia and I wallowed, turning on ourselves, hovering over abysses of ruby-colored transparence, hiding among turquoise-colored filaments that wriggled up from the depths; but these sensations of movement—wait and I'll explain it to you—were due only to what? They were due to a kind of general pulsation, no, I don't want to confuse things with the way they are now, because since we've been keeping the sea closed inside us it's natural that in moving it should make this piston effect, but in those days you certainly couldn't have talked about pistons, because you would have had to imagine a piston without walls, a combustion chamber of infinite volume as the sea appeared infinite to us, or rather the ocean, in which we were immersed, whereas now everything is pulsation and beating and rumble and crackling, inside the arteries and outside, the sea within the arteries that accelerates its course as soon as I feel Zylphia's hand seeking mine, or rather, as soon as I feel the acceleration in the course of Zylphia's arteries as she feels my hand seeking hers (the two flows which are still the same flow of a same sea and which are joined beyond the contact of the thirsty fingertips); and also outside, the opaque thirsty outside that seeks dully to imitate the beat and rumble and crackling of inside, and vibrates in the accelerator under Signor

Cècere's foot, and all the line of cars stopped at the exit from the superhighway tries to repeat the pulsing of the ocean now buried inside us, of the red ocean that was once without shores, under the sun.

It is a false sense of movement that this now-motionless line of cars transmits, crackling; then it moves and it's as if it were still, the movement is false, it merely repeats signs and white stripes and roadbeds; and the whole journey has been nothing but false movement in the immobility and indifference of everything that is outside. Only the sea moved and moves, outside or inside, only in that movement did Zylphia and I become aware of each other's presence, even if then we didn't so much as graze each other, even if I was undulating in this direction and she in that, but the sea had only to quicken its rhythm and I became aware of Zylphia's presence, her presence which was different, for example, from Signor Cècere, who was however also around even then and I could sense him as I felt an acceleration of the same sort as that other one but with a negative charge, that is the acceleration of the sea (and now of the blood) with regard to Zylphia was (is) like swimming toward each other, or else like swimming and chasing each other in play, while the acceleration (of the sea and now of the blood) with regard to Signor Cècere was (is) like a swimming away to avoid him, or else like swimming toward him to make him go away, all of this involving no change in the relationship of our respective distances.

Now it is Signor Cècere who accelerates (the words used are the same but the meanings change) and passes an Alfa Romeo in a curve, and it is with regard to Zylphia that he accelerates, to distract her with a risky maneuver, a false risky maneuver, from the swimming that unites her and me: false, I say, as a maneuver, not as a risk because the risk may well be real, that is to our inside which in a crash could spurt outside; whereas the maneuver in itself changes nothing at all, the distances between Alfa, curve, Volkswagen can assume different values and relationships but nothing essential happens, as nothing essential happens in Zylphia, who doesn't care a bit about Signor Cècere's driving, at most it is Jenny Fumagalli who exults: "My, isn't this car fast?" and her exultation, in the presumption that Signor Cècere's bold driving is for her benefit, is doubly unjustified, first because her inside transmits nothing to her that justifies exultation, and secondly because she is mistaken about Signor Cècere's intentions as he in turn is mistaken, believing he is achieving God knows what with his showing off, just as she, Jenny Fumagalli, was mistaken before about my intentions, when I was at the wheel and she at my side, and there in back next to Zylphia Signor Cècere, too, was mistaken, both concentrating—he and Jenny—on the reverse arrangement of dry layers of surface, unaware—dilated into balls as they were—that the only real things that happen are those that happen in the swimming of our immersed parts; and so this silly business of passing Alfas meaning nothing, like a passing of fixed, immobile, nailed-down objects which continues to be superimposed on the story of our free and real swimming, continues to seek meaning by interfering with it, in the only silly way it knows, risk of blood, a false return to a sea of blood which would no longer be blood or sea.

Here I must hasten to make clear—before by another idiotic passing of a trailer truck Signor Cècere makes all clarification pointless—the way that the common blood-sea of the past was common and at the same time individual to each of us and how we can continue swimming in it as such and how we can't: I don't know if I can make this sort of explanation in a hurry because, as always, when this general substance is discussed, the talk can't be in general terms but has to vary according to the relationship between one individual and the others, so it amounts practically to beginning all over again at the beginning. Now then: this business of having the vital element in common was a beautiful thing inasmuch as the separation between me and Zylphia was so to speak overcome and we could feel ourselves at the same time two distinct individuals and a single whole, which always has its advantages, but when you realize that this single whole also included absolutely insipid presences such as Jenny Fumagalli, or worse, unbearable ones such as Signor Cècere, then thanks all the same, the thing loses much of its interest. This is the point where the reproductive instinct comes into play: we had a great desire, Zylphia and I, or at least I had a great desire, and I think she must have had it too,

since she was willing, to multiply our presence in the sea-blood so that there would be more and more of us to profit from it and less and less of Signor Cècere, and as we had our reproductive cells all ready for that very purpose, we fell to fertilizing with a will, that is to say I fertilized everything of hers that was fertilizable, so that our presence would increase in both absolute number and in percentage, and Signor Cècere—though he too made feverish clumsy efforts at reproducing himself—would remain in a minority—this was the dream, the virtual obsession that gripped me-—a minority that would become smaller and smaller, insignificant, zero point zero zero etc. per cent, until he vanished into the dense cloud of our progeny as in a school of rapid and ravenous anchovies who would devour him bit by bit, burying him inside our dry inner layers, bit by bit, where the sea's flow would never reach him again, and then the sea-blood would have become one with us, that is, all blood would finally be our blood.

This is in fact the secret desire I feel, looking at the stiff collar of Signor Cècere up front: make him disappear, eat him up, I mean: not eat him up myself, because he turns my stomach slightly (in view of the pimples), but emit, project, outside myself (outside the Zylphia-me unit), a school of ravenous anchovies (of me-sardines, of Zylphia-sardines) to devour Signor Cècere, deprive him of the use of a circulatory system (as well as of a combustion engine, as well as the illusory use of an engine foolishly combustive), and while we're at it, devour also that pain in the neck Fumagalli, who because of the simple fact that I sat next to her before has got it into her head that I flirted with her somehow, when I wasn't paying the slightest attention to her, and now she says in that whiny little voice of hers: "Watch out, Zylphia" (just to cause trouble), "I know that gentleman back there . . ." just to suggest I behaved with her before as I'm behaving now with Zylphia, but what can la Fumagalli know about what is really happening between me and Zylphia, about how Zylphia and I are continuing our ancient swim through the scarlet depths?

I'll go back to what I was saying earlier, because I have the impression things have become a bit confused: to devour Signor Cècere, to ingurgitate him was the best way to separate him from the blood-sea when the blood was in fact the sea, when our present inside was outside and our outside, inside; but now, in reality, my secret desire is to make Signor Cècere become pure outside, deprive him of the inside he illicitly enjoys, make him expel the lost sea within his pleonastic person; in short, my dream is to eject against him not so much a swarm of me-anchovies as a hail of me-projectiles, rat-tat-tat to riddle him from head to foot, making him spurt his black blood to the last drop, and this idea is linked also to the idea of reproducing myself with Zylphia, of multiplying with her our blood circulation in a platoon or battalion of vindictive descendants armed with automatic rifles to riddle Signor Cècere, this in fact now prompts my sanguinary instinct (in all secrecy, given my constant mien as a civil, polite person just like the rest of you), the sanguinary instinct connected to the meaning of blood as "our blood" which I bear in me just as you do, civilly and politely.

Thus far everything may seem clear: however, you must bear in mind that to make it clear I have so simplified things that I'm not sure whether the step forward I've made is really a step forward. Because from the moment when blood becomes "our blood," the relationship between us and blood changes, that is, what counts is the blood insofar as it is "ours," and all the rest, us included, counts less. So there was in my impulse toward Zylphia, not only the drive to have all the ocean for us, but also the drive to lose it, the ocean, to annihilate ourselves in the ocean, to destroy ourselves, to torment ourselves, or rather—as a beginning—to torment her, Zylphia my beloved, to tear her to pieces, to eat her up. And with her it's the same: what she wanted was to torment me, devour me, swallow me, nothing but that. The orange stain of the sun seen from the water's depths swayed like a medusa, and Zylphia darted among the luminous filaments devoured by the desire to devour me, and I writhed in the tangles of darkness that rose from the depths like long strands of seaweed beringed with indigo glints, raving and longing to bite her. And finally there on the back seat of the Volkswagen in an abrupt swerve I fell on her and I sank my teeth into her skin just where the "American cut" of her sleeves left her shoulder

bare, and she dug her sharp nails between the buttons of my shirt, and this is the same impulse as before, the impulse that tended to remove her (or remove me) from marine citizenship and now instead tends to remove the sea from her, from me, in any case to achieve the passage from the blazing element of life to the pale and opaque element which is our absence from the ocean and the absence of the ocean from us.

The same impulse acts then with amorous obstinacy between her and me and with hostile obstinacy against Signor Cècere: for each of us there is no other way of entering into a relationship with the others; I mean, it's always this impulse that nourishes our own relationship with the others in the most different and unrecognizable forms, as when Signor Cècere passes cars of greater horse-power than his, even a Porsche, through intentions of mastery toward these superior cars and through ill-advised amorous intentions toward Zylphia and also vindictive ones toward me and also self-destructive ones toward himself. So, through risk, the insignificance of the outside manages to interfere with the essential element, the sea where Zylphia and I continue our nuptial flights of fertilization and destruction: since the risk aims directly at the blood, at our blood, for if it were a matter only of the blood of Signor Cècere (a driver, after all, heedless of the traffic laws) we should hope that at the very least he would run off the road, but in effect it's a question of all of us, of the risk of a possible return of our blood from darkness to the sun, from the separate to the mixed, a false return, as all of us in our ambiguous game pretend to forget, because our present inside once it is poured out becomes our present outside and it can no longer return to being the outside of the old days.

So Zylphia and I in falling upon each other in the curves play at provoking vibrations in the blood, that is, at permitting the false thrills of the insipid outside to be added to those that vibrated from the depths of the millennia and of the marine abysses, and then Signor Cècere said: "Let's have a nice plate of spaghetti at the truck drivers' café," masking as generous love of life his constant torpid violence, and Jenny Fumagalli, acting clever, spoke up: "But you have to get to the spaghetti first, before the truck drivers, otherwise they won't leave you any," clever and always working in the service of the blackest destruction, and the black truck with the license Udine 38 96 21 was there ahead, roaring at its forty m.p.h. along the road that was nothing but curves, and Signor Cècere thought (and perhaps said): "I'll make it," and he swung out to the left, and we all thought (and didn't say): "You can't make it," and in fact, from the curve the Jaguar was already arriving full tilt, and to avoid it the Volkswagen scraped the wall and bounced back to scrape its side against the curved chrome bumper and, bouncing, it struck the plane tree, then went spinning down into the precipice, and the sea of common blood which floods over the crumpled metal isn't the blood-sea of our origin but only an infinitesimal detail of the outside, of the insignificant and arid outside, a number in the statistics of accidents over the weekend.

Part Two
Priscilla

In asexual reproduction, the simplest entity which is the cell divides at a point in its growth. The nucleus divides into two equal parts, and from a single entity, two result. But we cannot say that a first entity has given birth to a second. The two new entities are, to the same degree, the products of the first. The first has disappeared. Essentially, it is dead, since only the two entities it has produced survive. It does not decompose in the way sexed animals die, but it ceases to be. It ceases to be, in the sense that it is discontinuous. But, in a point of the reproduction, there was continuity. There exists a point where the primitive *one* becomes *two.* When there are two, there is again discontinuity in each of

the entities. But the passage implies an *instant* of continuity between the two. The first dies, but*in its death* appears a fundamental instant of continuity.

Georges Bataille, *L'Érotisme* (from the introduction)

All genes of the same chromosome are not always pulled into the same daughter cell, and so are not always inherited together, though they do tend to be. For two homologous filaments, during their synapsis with one another, are apt to break, at identical points, and to become joined up again with their corresponding pieces interchanged, a process called *crossing-over.* Thus a given gene of paternal origin may in the mature germ cell find itself in the same chromosome with some other gene of maternal origin, instead of with its former associate gene.

***Encyclopaedia Britannica,* "Gene"**

... in the midst of the Aeneases who carry their Anchiseses on their backs, I pass from one shore to another, alone, hating these invisible parents astride their sons for all their life. . . .

J.-P. Sartre, *Les Mots*

Suddenly I became aware that an adenine-thymine pair held together by two hydrogen bonds was identical in shape to a guanine-cytosine pair held together by at least two hydrogen bonds. All the hydrogen bonds seemed to form naturally; no fudging was required to make the two types of base pairs identical in shape. Quickly I called Jerry over to ask him whether this time he had any objection to my new base pairs. When he said no, my morale skyrocketed . . . this type of double helix suggested a replication scheme much more satisfactory . . . Given the base sequence of one chain, that of its partner was automatically determined. Conceptually, it was thus very easy to visualize how a single chain could be the template for the synthesis of a chain with the complementary sequence. Upon his arrival Francis did not get more than halfway through the door before I let loose that the answer to everything was in our hands . . .

James D. Watson, *The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of the Structure of DNA,* Chap. 26

Everything summons us to death; nature, as if envious of the good she has done us, announces to us often and reminds us that she cannot leave us for long that bit of matter she lends us, which must not remain in the same hands, and which must eternally be in circulation: she needs it for other forms, she asks it back for other works.

Bossuet, *Sermon sur la mort*

One need not worry about how a fixed automaton of this sort can produce others which are larger and more complex than itself. In this case the greater size and the higher complexity of the object to be constructed will be reflected in a presumably still greater size of the instructions *I* that have to be furnished. [. . .] In what follows, all automata for whose construction the facility *A* will be used are going to share with *A* this property. All of them will have a place for an instruction *I,* that is, a place where such an instruction can be inserted. ... It is quite clear that the instruction *I* is roughly effecting the function of a gene. It is also clear that the copying mechanism *B* performs the fundamental act of reproduction, the duplication of the genetic material, which is clearly the fundamental operation in the multiplication of living cells.

John von Neumann, *Theory of Automata* (in *Collected Works,* Vol. 5)

As for those who so exalt incorruptibility, inalterability, I believe they are brought to say these things through their great desire to live a long time and through the terror they have of death. And not considering that, if men were immortal, these men would not have had an opportunity to come into the

world. They would deserve to encounter a Medusa's head, which would transform them into statues of jasper or of diamond, to make them more perfect than they are. . . . And there is not the slightest doubt that the Earth is far more perfect, being, as it is, alterable, changeable, than if it were a mass of stone, even if it were a whole diamond, hard and impenetrable.

Galileo Galilei, *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi,giornata I*

I. Mitosis

. . . And when I say "dying of love,"—*Qfwfq went on,* —I mean something you have no idea of, because you think falling in love has to signify falling in love with another person, or thing, or what have you, in other words I'm here and what I'm in love with is there, in short a relationship connected to the life of relationships, whereas I'm talking about the times before I had established any relationships between myself and anything else, there was a cell and the cell was me, and that was that. Now we needn't wonder whether there were other cells around too, it doesn't matter, there was the cell that was me and it was already quite an achievement, such a thing is more than enough to fill one's life, and it's this very sense of fullness I want to talk to you about. I don't mean fullness because of the protoplasm I had, because even if it had increased to a considerable degree it wasn't anything exceptional, cells of course are full of protoplasm, what else could they be full of; no, I'm talking about a sense of fullness that was, if you'll allow the expression, quote spiritual unquote, namely, the awareness that this cell was me, this sense of fullness, this fullness of being aware was something that kept me awake nights, something that made me beside myself, in other words the situation I mentioned before, I was "dying of love."

Now I know all of you will raise a flock of objections because being in love presupposes not only self-awareness but also awareness of the other, etc., etc., and all I can answer is thanks a lot I know that much myself but if you aren't going to be patient there's no use in my trying to explain, and above all you have to forget for a minute the way you fall in love nowadays, the way I do too now, if you'll permit me confidences of this sort, I say confidences because I know if I told you about my falling in love at present you could accuse me of being indiscreet, whereas I can talk without any scruples about the time when I was a unicellular organism, that is I can talk about it objectively as the saying goes, because it's all water under the bridge now, and it's a feat on my part even to remember it, and yet what I do remember is still enough to disturb me from head to foot, so when I use the word "objectively" it's a figure of speech, as it always is when you start out saying you're objective and then what with one thing and another you end up being subjective, and so this business I want to tell you about is difficult for me precisely because it keeps slipping into the subjective, in my subjective state of those days, which though I recall it only partially still disturbs me from head to foot like my subjective of the present, and that's why I've used expressions that have the disadvantage of creating confusion with what is different nowadays while they have the advantage of bringing to light what is common between the two times.

First of all I must be more specific about what little I remember, or rather I should warn you that if certain parts of my story are narrated less fully than others it doesn't mean they're less important but only that they are less firm in my memory, since what I remember well is my love story's initial phase if you want to call it that, I would almost say the preceding phase; at the climax of the love story my memory dissolves, frays, goes to pieces, and there's no way for me to remember then what happens afterward. I say this not to ward off objections that I'm trying to make you listen to a love story I don't even remember, but to clarify the fact that not remembering it is at a certain point necessary to make the story this one and not another, in other words while a story usually consists in the memory you have of it, here not remembering the story becomes the very story itself.

So I am speaking then of the initial phase of a love story which afterward is probably repeated in an interminable multiplication of initial phases just like the first and identified with the first, a multiplication or rather a squaring, an exponential growth of stories which is always tantamount to the first story, but it isn't as if I were so very sure of all this, I assume it as you can also assume it. I'm referring to an initial phase that precedes the other initial phases, a first phase which must surely have existed, because it's logical to expect it to exist, and also because I remember it very well, and when I say it's the first I don't in the least mean first in the absolute sense, that's what you'd like me to mean but I don't; I mean first in the sense that we can consider any of these identical initial phases the first, and the one I refer to is the one I remember, the one I remember as first in the sense that before it I don't remember anything. And as for the first in the absolute sense, your guess is as good as mine, I'm not interested.

Let's begin this way, then: there is a cell, and this cell is a unicellular organism, and this unicellular organism is me, and I know it, and I'm pleased about it. Nothing special so far. Now let's try to represent this situation for ourselves in space and time. Time passes, and I, more and more pleased with being in it and with being me, am also more and more pleased that there is time, and that I am in time, or rather that time passes and I pass time and time passes me, or rather I am pleased to be contained in time, to be the content of time, or the container, in short, to mark by being me the passing of time. Now you must admit this begins to arouse a sense of expectation, a happy and hopeful waiting, a happy youthful impatience, and also an anxiety, a youthful excited anxiety also basically painful, a painful unbearable tension and impatience. In addition you must keep in mind that existing also means being in space, and in fact I was dished out into space to my full width, with space all around, and even though I had no knowledge it obviously continued on all sides. There's no point in bothering now about what else this space contained, I was closed in myself and I minded my own business, and I didn't even have a nose so I couldn't stick my nose out, or an eye to take an interest in outside, in what was and what wasn't; however, I had the sense of occupying space within space, of wallowing in it, of growing with my protoplasm in various directions, but as I said, I don't want to insist on this quantitative and material aspect, I want to talk above all about the satisfaction and the burning desire to do something with space, to have time to extract enjoyment from space, to have space to make something in the passing of time.

Up until now I've kept time and space separated to help you to understand me better, or rather so that I could understand better what I should make you understand, but in those days I didn't really distinguish too clearly what one of them was from what the other was: there was me, in that point and at that moment—right? —and then there was an outside which seemed to me a void I might occupy in another moment or point, in a series of other points or moments, in short a potential projection of me where, however, I wasn't present, and therefore a void which was actually the world and the future, but I didn't know that yet; it was void because perception was still denied me, and as for imagination I was even further behind, and when it came to mental categories I was a total loss, but I had this contentment because outside of me there was this void that wasn't me, which perhaps could become me because "me" was the only word I knew, the only word I could have declined, a void that could become me, however, wasn't me at that moment and basically never would be: it was the discovery of something else that wasn't yet something but anyhow wasn't me, or rather wasn't me at that moment and in that point and therefore was something else, and this discovery aroused an exhilarating enthusiasm in me, no, a torment, a dizzying torture, the dizziness of a void which represented everything possible, the complement of that fullness that was for me all, and there I was brimming over with love for this elsewhere, this other time, this otherwise, silent and void.

So you see that when I spoke of being "in love" I wasn't saying something so far-fetched, and you were always on the point of interrupting me to say: "In love with yourself, um-hum, in love with yourself," and I was wise to pay no attention and not use or let you use that expression; there, you see that being

in love was even then searing passion for what was outside me, it was the writhing of one who yearns to escape outside himself as I then went rolling around in time and space, dying of love.

To tell properly the way things proceeded I must remind you of how I was made, a mass of protoplasm like a kind of pulpy dumpling with a nucleus in the middle. Now I'm not just trying to make myself sound interesting, but I must say that in that nucleus I led a very intense life. Physically I was an individual in his full flowering, all right, on this point I feel it would be indiscreet to insist: I was young, healthy, at the peak of my strength, but by that I don't certainly want to deny that another who might have been in worse shape, with his cytoplasm fragile or watery, could have revealed even greater talents. What's important to my story is how much of this physical life of mine was reflected in the nucleus; I say physical not because there was a distinction between physical life and some other kind of life, but to allow you to understand how physical life had, in the nucleus, its point of greatest concentration, sensitivity, and tension, so that while all around it I was perhaps calm and blissful in my whitish pulp, the nucleus shared in this cytoplasmic calm and bliss in its nucleic way, that is, accentuating and thickening the tangled grain and speckling that adorned it, and so I concealed in myself an intense nucleic labor which then corresponded only to my exterior well-being, so that, we might say, the more I was happy to be me, the more my nucleus became charged with this thick impatience, and everything I was and everything I was gradually becoming ended up being nucleus, absorbed there and registered and accumulated in a serpentine twisting of spirals, in the gradually different way that they were forming a skein and unraveling, so I would say that everything I knew I knew in the nucleus, if that wouldn't involve the danger of making you believe in a separate or perhaps even opposing function of the nucleus with respect to the rest, whereas if there's an agile and impulsive organism where you can't make all these distinctions that is the unicellular organism. However, I don't want to exaggerate in the other direction either, as if to give you the idea of a chemical homogeneity like an inorganic drop spilled there; you know better than I how many differentiations there are within the cell, and even within the nucleus, and mine was in fact all speckled, freckled, dotted with filaments or strokes or lines, and each of these filaments or strokes or lines or chromosomes had a specific relationship to some characteristic of the cell that was me. Now I might attempt a somewhat risky assertion and say I was nothing but the sum of those filaments or lines or strokes, an assertion which can be disputed because of the fact that I was I entirely and not a part of myself, but one that can also be sustained by explaining that those strokes were myself translated into strokes, to then be retranslated back into me. And therefore when I speak of the intense life of the nucleus I don't mean so much the rustle or scraping of all those lines inside the nucleus as the nervousness of an individual who knows he has all those lines, he is all those lines, but also knows there's something that can't be represented with those lines, a void of which those lines succeed only in feeling the emptiness. Or rather the tension toward the outside, the elsewhere, the otherwise, which is what is then called a state of desire.

I had better be more precise about this state of desire business: a state of desire takes place when from a state of satisfaction one passes to a state of mounting satisfaction and then, immediately thereafter, to a state of dissatisfying satisfaction, namely, of desire. It isn't true that the state of desire takes place when something is missing; if something is missing, too bad, you do without it, and if the something is indispensable, in doing without it you do without some vital function, and therefore you proceed rapidly toward certain extinction. I mean that from a pure and simple state of lack nothing can be born, nothing good and nothing bad, only other lacks including finally the lack of life, a condition notoriously neither good nor bad. But a state of lack pure and simple doesn't exist, as far as I know, in nature: the state of lack is experienced always in contrast with a previous state of satisfaction, and it is from the state of satisfaction that everything which can grow, grows. And it isn't true that a state of desire presupposes necessarily a desired something; the desired something begins to exist only when there is the state of desire; not because before that something wasn't desired but because before who knew it existed? So once there's the state of desire it's precisely that something which begins to be,

something which if all goes well will be the desired something but which could also remain just a something through lack of the desirer who in desiring might also cease to be, as in the present case of "dying of love," which we still don't know the end of. Then, to go back to the point where we were before, I must tell you that my state of desire tended simply toward an elsewhere, another time, an otherwise that might contain something (or, let's say, the world) or contain only me, or me in relation to something (or to the world), or something (the world) without me any more.

To make this point clear, I realize now, I have gone back to talking in general terms, losing the ground gained with my previous clarifications; this often happens in love stories. I was becoming aware of what was happening around me through what was happening to the nucleus and especially to the chromosomes of the nucleus; through them I gained the awareness of a void beyond me and beyond them, the fitful awareness that through them forced me to something, a state of desire which, however little we can move, becomes immediately a movement of desire. This movement of desire remained basically a desire for movement, as usually happens when you can't move toward some place because the world doesn't exist or you don't know it exists, and in these cases desire moves you to want to do, to do something, or rather to do anything. But when you can do nothing because of the lack of an outside world, the only doing you can allow yourself with the scant means at your disposal is that special kind of doing that is saying. In short, I was moved to express: my state of desire, my state-motion-desire of motion-desire-love moved me to say, and since the only thing I had to say was myself, I was moved to say myself, to express myself. I'll be more precise: before, when I said that very few means suffice for expressing I wasn't telling the exact truth, and therefore I'll correct myself: for expressing you need a language, and that's no trifle. As language I had all those specks or twigs called chromosomes, and therefore all I had to do was repeat those specks or twigs and I was repeating myself, obviously repeating myself insofar as language was concerned, which as you will see is the first step toward repeating myself as such, which as you will also see isn't repetition at all. But you'd better see what you're going to see when the right time comes, because if I keep making clarifications within other clarifications I'll never find my way out again.

It's true that at this point we must proceed with great care to avoid falling into errors. All this situation I've tried to narrate and which at the beginning I defined as being "in love," explaining then how this phrase must be understood—all this, in short, had repercussions inside the nucleus in a quantitative and energetic enrichment of the chromosomes, indeed in their joyful doubling, because each of the chromosomes was repeated in a second chromosome. Speaking of the nucleus, I naturally tend to identify it with awareness, which is only a rather crude simplification, but even if things really were like that, it wouldn't imply awareness of possessing a double number of lines, because since each line had a function, each being—to return to the language metaphor—a word, the fact that one word was to be found twice didn't change what I was, since I consisted of the assortment or the vocabulary of the different words or functions at my disposal and the fact of having double words was felt in that sense of fullness which I earlier called quote spiritual unquote, and now you see how the quotation marks alluded to the fact that we were dealing with a basically quite material business of filaments or lines or twigs, though none the less joyful and energetic.

So far I remember everything very well, because the memories of the nucleus, awareness or no awareness, retain a greater clarity. But this tension I was telling you about, as time went by, was transmitted to the cytoplasm: I was seized with a need to stretch to my full width, to a kind of intermittent stiffening of the nerves I didn't have: and so the cytoplasm had become more elongated as if the two extremes wanted to run away from each other, in a bundle of fibrous matter which was all trembling no more and no less than the nucleus. In fact, it was now hard to distinguish between nucleus and cytoplasm: the nucleus had so to speak dissolved and the little sticks were poised there halfway

along this shaft of tense and fitful fibers, but without scattering, turning upon themselves all together like a merry-go-round.

To tell the truth, I had hardly noticed the explosion of the nucleus: I felt I was all myself in a more total way than ever before, and at the same time that I wasn't myself any longer, that all this me was a place where there was everything except me: what I mean is, I had the sense of being inhabited, no, of inhabiting myself. No, of inhabiting a me inhabited by others. No, I had the sense that another was inhabited by others. Instead, what I realized only then was that fact of redoubling which before as I said I hadn't seen clearly: then and there I found myself with an exorbitant number of chromosomes, all mixed together at the time because the pairs of twin chromosomes had become unstuck and I couldn't make head or tail of anything. In other words: faced by the mute unknown void into which I had gradually and amorously submerged myself I had to say something that would re-establish my presence, but at that moment the words at my disposal seemed so many to me, too many to be arranged into something to say that was still me, my name, my new name.

I remember another thing: how from this state of chaotic congestion I tended to pass, in a vain search for relief, to a more balanced and neat congestion, to have a complete assortment of chromosomes arranged on one side and another on the other side, so the nucleus—or rather that whirligig of strokes that had taken the place of the exploded nucleus—at a certain point finally assumed a symmetrical, mirrored appearance, as if divaricating its strength to dominate the challenge of the silent unknown void, so the redoubling which first concerned the individual twigs now involved the nucleus as a whole, or rather what I went on considering a sole nucleus and went on operating as such, though it was simply an eddy of stuff separating into two distinct eddies.

Here I must explain that this separation wasn't a matter of old chromosomes on one side and new chromosomes on the other, because if I haven't already told you I'll tell you now, every twig after thickening had divided lengthwise, so they were all equally old and equally new; this is important because I used before the verb "to repeat," which as always was rather approximate and might give the mistaken idea that there was an original twig and a copy, and also the verb "to say" was a bit out of place, although that expression about saying myself worked out fairly well, out of place in that to say something you have to have someone who says and something that's said, and this wasn't actually the case at that time.

It's difficult, in other words, to define in precise terms the imprecision of amorous moods, which consist in a joyous impatience to possess a void, in a greedy expectation of what might come to me from the void, and also in the pain of being still deprived of what I am impatiently and greedily expecting, in the tormenting pain of feeling myself already potentially doubled to possess potentially something potentially mine, and yet forced not to possess, to consider not mine and therefore potentially another's what I potentially possess. The pain of having to bear the fact that the potentially mine is also potentially another's, or, for all I know, actually another's; this greedy jealous pain is a state of such fullness that it makes you believe being in love consists entirely and only in pain, that the greedy impatience is nothing but jealous desperation, and the emotion of impatience is only the emotion of despair that twists within itself, becoming more and more desperate, with the capacity that each particle of despair has for redoubling and arranging itself symmetrically by the analogous particle and for tending to move from its own state to enter another, perhaps worse state which rends and lacerates the former.

In this tug of war between the two eddies, an interval was being formed, and this was the moment when my state of doubling began to be clear to me, first as a branching of awareness, as a kind of squinting of the sense of presence of all of me, because it wasn't only the nucleus which was affected by these phenomena; as you already know, everything going on there in the little sticks of the nucleus was reflected in what was happening in the extension of my tapering physical person, commanded in fact

by those sticks. So my cytoplasm fibers were also becoming concentrated in two opposing directions and were growing thin in the middle until the moment came when I seemed to have two equal bodies, one on one side and one on the other, joined by a bottleneck that was becoming finer and finer until it was only a thread, and at that instant I was for the first time aware of plurality, for the first and last time because it was late by then, I felt the plurality in me as the image and destiny of the world's plurality, and the sense of being part of the world, of being lost in the innumerable world, and at the same time the still-sharp sense of being me; I say "sense" and no longer "awareness" because if we agree to call awareness what I felt in the nucleus, then the nuclei were two, and each was tearing at the last fibers that kept it bound to the other, and by now they were both transmitting on their own, on my own now, on my own in a repeated fashion, each independent, awareness as if stammering ripped away the last fibers of my memory my memories.

I say that the sense of being me no longer came from the nuclei but from that bit of plasma strangled and wrung out there in the middle, and it was still like a filiform zenith of fullness, like a delirium where I saw all the diversities of the plural world filiformly radiating from my former, singular continuity. And at the same moment I realized that my moving out of myself was an exit with no return, without possible restitution of the me that now I realize I'm throwing away without its possible restitution to me ever, and then comes the death agony that precipitates triumphantly because life is already elsewhere, already the dazzling of other's memory redoubled not superimposed of another's cell establishes the relationship of the novice cell, the relationship with its novice self and with the rest.

Everything that came afterward is lost in the memory, shattered and multiplied like the propagation and repetition in the world of unremembering and mortal individuals, but already an instant before that afterward began I understood everything that was to happen, the future or the soldering of the link that now or already then happens or tended desperately to happen, I understood that this picking up and moving out of oneself which is birth-death would make the circuit, would be transformed from strangling and fracture into interpenetration and mingling of asymmetrical cells that add up the messages repeated through trillions of trillions of mortal loves, I saw my mortal love return to seeking the original soldering or the final one, and all the words that weren't exact in the narration of my love story became exact and yet their meaning remained the exact meaning of before, and the loves kindled in the forest of the plurality of the sexes and of the individuals and of the species, the void dizziness filled with forms species and individuals and sexes, and yet there was always the repetition of that wrench of myself, of that picking up and moving out, picking myself up and moving out of myself, the yearning toward that impossible doing which leads to saying, that impossible saying that leads to expressing oneself, even when the self will be divided into a self that says and will surely die and a self that is said and that at times risks living on, in a multicellular and unique self that retains in its cells the one that, repeating itself, repeats the secret words of the vocabulary that we are, and in a unicellular and countlessly plural unicellular self which can be poured out in countless cell-words of which only the one that encounters the complementary cell-word that is its asymmetrical self will try to continue the continuous and fragmentary story, but if it doesn't encounter it, no matter, in fact in the story which I'm about to tell there was no plan for the encounter at all, indeed at the beginning we'll try to avoid its taking place, because what matters is the initial or rather preceding phase which repeats every initial or rather preceding phase, the encounter with oneself loving and mortal, in the best of cases loving and in any case mortal; what matters is the moment when wrenching yourself from yourself you feel in a flash the union of past and future, just as I, in the wrenching from myself which I have just now finished narrating to you, saw what was to happen, finding myself today in love, in a today perhaps in the future perhaps in the past but also surely contemporaneous with that last unicellular and self-contained instant. I saw who was coming forward toward me from the void of the elsewhere, the other time, the otherwise with first and last name address red coat little black boots bangs freckles: Priscilla Langwood, chez Madame Lebras, cent-quatre-vingt-treize Rue Vaugirard, Paris quinzième.

II. Meiosis

Narrating things as they are means narrating them from the beginning, and even if I start the story at a point where the characters are multicellular organisms, for example the story of my relationship with Priscilla, I have first to define clearly what I mean when I say me and what I mean when I say Priscilla, then I can go on to establish what this relationship was. So I'll begin by saying that Priscilla is an individual of my same species and of the sex opposite mine, multicellular as I now find myself, too; but having said this I still haven't said anything, because I must specify that by multicellular individual is meant a complex of about fifty trillion cells very different among themselves but marked by certain chains of identical acids in the chromosomes of each cell of each individual, acids that determine various processes in the proteins of the cells themselves.

So narrating the story of me and Priscilla means first of all defining the relations established between my proteins and Priscilla's proteins, commanded, both mine and hers, by chains of nucleic acids arranged in identical series in each of her cells and in each of mine. Then narrating this story becomes still more complicated than when it was a question of a single cell, not only because the description of the relationship must take into account so many things that happen at the same time but above all because it's necessary to establish who is having relations with whom, before specifying what sort of relations they are. Actually, when you come right down to it, defining the sort of relations isn't after all as important as it seems, because saying we have mental relations, for example, or else, for example, physical relations doesn't change much, since a mental relationship involves several billion special cells called neurons which, however, function by receiving stimuli from such a great number of other cells that we might just as well consider all the trillions of cells of the organism at once as we do when we talk about a physical relationship.

In saying how difficult it is to establish who's having relations with whom we must first clear the decks of a subject that often crops up in conversation: namely, the fact that from one moment to the next I am no longer the same I nor is Priscilla any longer the same Priscilla, because of the continuous renewal of the protein molecules in our cells through, for example, digestion or also respiration which fixes the oxygen in the bloodstream. This kind of argument takes us completely off our course because while it's true that the cells are renewed, in renewing themselves they go on following the program established by those that were there before and so in this sense you could reasonably insist that I continue to be I and Priscilla, Priscilla. This in other words is not the problem, but perhaps it was of some use to raise it because it helps us realize that things aren't as simple as they seem and so we slowly approach the point where we will realize how complicated they are.

Well then, when I say I, or when I say Priscilla, what do I mean? I mean that special configuration which my cells and her cells assume through a special relationship between the environment and a special genetic heritage which from the beginning seemed invented on purpose to cause my cells to be mine and Priscilla's cells to be Priscilla's. As we proceed we'll see that nothing is made on purpose, that nobody has invented anything, that the way I am and Priscilla is really doesn't matter in the least to anyone: all a genetic heritage has to do is to transmit what was transmitted to it for transmitting, not giving a damn about how it's received. But for the moment let's limit ourselves to answering the question if I, in quotes, and Priscilla, in quotes, are our genetic heritage, in quotes, or our form, in quotes. And when I say form I mean both what is seen and what isn't seen, namely, all her way of being Priscilla, the fact that fuchsia or orange is becoming to her, the scent emanating from her skin not only

because she was born with a glandular constitution suited to giving off that scent but also because of everything she has eaten in her life and the brands of soap she has used, in other words because of what is called, in quotes, culture, and also her way of walking and of sitting down which comes to her from the way she has moved among those who move in the cities and houses and streets where she's lived, all this but also the things she has in her memory, after having seen them perhaps just once and perhaps at the movies, and also the forgotten things which still remain recorded somewhere in the back of the neurons like all the psychic trauma a person has to swallow from infancy on.

Now, both in the form you see and don't see and in our genetic heritage, Priscilla and I have absolutely identical elements—common to the two of us, or to the environment, or to the species—and also elements which establish a difference. Then the problem begins to arise whether the relationship between me and Priscilla is the relationship only between the differential elements, because the common ones can be overlooked in both—that is, whether by "Priscilla" we must understand "what is peculiar to Priscilla as far as the other members of the species are concerned"—or whether the relationship is between the common elements, and then we must decide if it's the ones common to the species or to the environment or to the two of us as distinct from the rest of the species and perhaps more beautiful than the others.

On closer examination, if individuals of opposite sex enter into a particular relationship it clearly isn't we who decide but the species, or rather not so much the species as the animal condition, or the vegetable-animal condition of the animal-vegetives distinguished into distinct sexes. Now, in the choice I make of Priscilla to have with her relations whose nature I don't yet know—and in the choice that Priscilla makes of me, assuming that she does choose me and doesn't change her mind at the last moment—no one knows what order of priority comes first into play, therefore no one knows how many I's precede the I that I think I am, and how many Priscillas precede the Priscilla toward whom I believe I am running.

In short, the more you simplify the terms of the question the more they become complicated: once we've established that what I call "I" consists of a certain number of amino acids which line up in a certain way, it's logical that inside these molecules all possible relations are foreseen, and from outside we have nothing but the exclusion of some of the possible relations in the form of certain enzymes which block certain processes. Therefore you can say that it's as if everything possible had already happened to me, including the possibility of its not happening: once I am I the cards are all dealt, I dispose of a finite number of possibilities and no more, what happens outside counts for me only if it's translated into operations already foreseen by my nucleic acids, I'm walled up within myself, chained to my molecular program: outside of me I don't have and won't have relations with anything or with anybody. And neither will Priscilla; I mean the *real* Priscilla, poor thing. If around me and around her there's some stuff that seems to have relations with other stuff, these are facts that don't concern us: in reality for me and for her nothing substantial can happen.

Hardly a cheerful situation, therefore: and not because I was expecting to have a more complex individuality than the one given me, beginning with a special arrangement of an acid and of four basic substances which in their turn command the disposition of about twenty amino acids in the forty-six chromosomes of each cell I have; but because this individuality repeated in each of my cells is mine only after a manner of speaking, since out of forty-six chromosomes twenty-three come to me from my father and twenty-three from my mother, that is, I continue carrying my parents with me in all my cells, and I'll never be able to free myself of this burden.

What my parents programmed me to be in the beginning is what I am: that and nothing else. And in my parents' instructions are contained the instructions of my parents' parents handed down in turn from parent to parent in an endless chain of obedience. The story I wanted to narrate therefore is not only impossible to narrate but first of all impossible to live, because it's all there already, contained in a past

that can't be narrated since, in turn, it's included in its own past, in the many individual pasts—so many that we can't really be sure they aren't the past of the species and of what existed before the species, a general past to which all individual pasts refer but which no matter how far you go back doesn't exist except in the form of individual cases, such as Priscilla and I might be, between which, however, nothing happens, individual or general.

What each of us really is and has is the past; all we are and have is the catalogue of the possibilities that didn't fail, of the experiences that are ready to be repeated. A present doesn't exist, we proceed blindly toward the outside and the afterward, carrying out an established program with materials we fabricate ourselves, always the same. We don't tend toward any future, there's nothing awaiting us, we're shut within the system of a memory which foresees no task but remembering itself. What now leads me and Priscilla to seek each other isn't an impulse toward the afterward: it's the final action of the past that is fulfilled through us. Good-by, Priscilla, our encounter, our embrace are useless, we remain distant, or finally near, in other words forever apart.

Separation, the impossibility of meeting, has been in us from the very beginning. We were born not from a fusion but from a juxtaposition of distinct bodies. Two cells grazed each other: one is lazy and all pulp, the other is only a head and a darting tail. They are egg and seed: they experience a certain timidity; then they rush —at their different speeds—and hurry toward each other. The seed plunges headlong into the egg; the tail is left outside; the head—all full of nucleus—is shot at the nucleus of the egg; the two nuclei are shattered: you might expect heaven knows what fusion or mingling or exchange of selves; instead, what was written in one nucleus and in the other, those spaced lines, fall in and arrange themselves, on each side, in the new nucleus, very closely printed; the words of both nuclei fit in, whole and clearly separate. In short, nobody was lost in the other, nobody has given in or has given himself; the two cells now one are packaged together but just as they were before: the first thing they feel is a slight disappointment. Meanwhile the double nucleus has begun its sequence of duplications, printing the combined messages of father and mother in each of the offspring cells, perpetuating not so much the union as the unbridgeable distance that separates in each couple the two companions, the failure, the void that remains in the midst of even the most successful couple.

Of course, on every disputed issue our cells can follow the instructions of a single parent and thus feel free of the other's command, but we know what we claim to be in our exterior form counts for little compared to the secret program we carry printed in each cell, where the contradictory orders of father and mother continue arguing. What really counts is this incompatible quarrel of father and mother that each of us drags after him, with the rancor of every point where one partner has had to give way to the other, who then raises his voice still louder in his victory as dominant mate. So the characteristics that determine my interior and exterior form, when they are not the sum or the average of the orders received from father and mother together, are orders denied in the depth of the cells, counterbalanced by different orders which have remained latent, sapped by the suspicion that perhaps the other orders were better. So at times I'm seized with uncertainty as to whether I am really the sum of the dominant characteristics of the past, the result of a series of operations that produced always a number bigger than zero, or whether instead my true essence isn't rather what descends from the succession of defeated characteristics, the total of the terms with the minus sign, of everything that in the tree of derivations has remained excluded, stifled, interrupted: the weight of what hasn't been weighs on me, no less crushing than what has been and couldn't not be. Void, separation and waiting, that's what we are. And such we remain even on the day when the past inside us rediscovers its original forms, clustering into swarms of seed-cells or concentrated ripening of the egg-cells, and finally the words written in the nuclei are no longer the same as before but are no longer part of us either, they're a message beyond us, which already belongs to us no more. In a hidden point in ourselves the double series of orders from the past is divided in two and the new cells find themselves with a simple past, no

longer double, which gives them lightness and the illusion of being really new, of having a new past that almost seems a future.

Now, I've said it hastily like this but it's a complicated process, there in the darkness of the nucleus, in the depth of the sex organs, a succession of phases some a bit jumbled with others, but from which there's no turning back. At first the pairs of maternal and paternal messages which thus far had remained separate seem to remember they're couples and they join together two by two, so many fine little threads that become interwoven and confused; the desire to copulate outside myself now leads me to copulate within myself, at the depths of the extreme roots of the matter I'm made of, to couple the memory of the ancient pair I carry within me, the first couple, that is both the one that comes immediately before me, mother and father, and the absolute first one, the couple at the animal-vegetal origins of the first coupling on Earth, and so the forty-six filaments that an obscure and secret cell bears in the nucleus are knotted two by two, still not giving up their old disagreement, since in fact they immediately try to disentangle themselves but remain stuck at some point in the knot, so when in the end they do succeed, with a wrench, in separating—because meanwhile the mechanism of separation has taken possession of the whole cell, stretching out its pulp—each chromosome discovers it's changed, made of segments that first belonged some to one and some to the other, and it moves from the other, now changed too, marked by the alternate exchanges of the segments, and already two cells are being detached each with twenty-three chromosomes, one cell's different from the other's, and different from those that were in the previous cell, and at the next doubling there will be four cells all different, each with twenty-three chromosomes, in which what was the father's and the mother's, or rather the fathers' and the mothers', is mingled.

So finally the encounter of the pasts which can never take place in the present of those who believe they are meeting does take place in the form of the past of him who comes afterward and who cannot live that encounter in his own present. We believe we're going toward our marriage, but it is still the marriage of the fathers and the mothers which is celebrated through our expectation and our desire. What seems to us our happiness is perhaps only the happiness of the others' story which ends just where we thought ours began.

And it's pointless for us to run, Priscilla, to meet each other and follow each other: the past disposes of us with blind indifference, and once it has moved those fragments of itself and of us, it doesn't bother afterward how we spend them. We were only the preparation, the envelope, for the encounter of pasts which happens through us but which is already part of another story, the story of the afterward: the encounters always take place before and after us, and in them the elements of the new, forbidden to us, are active: chance, risk, improbability.

This is how we live, not free, surrounded by freedom, driven, acted on by this constant wave which is the combination of the possible cases and which passes through those points of space and of time in which the rose of the pasts is joined to the rose of the futures. The primordial sea was a soup of beringed molecules traversed at intervals by the messages of the similarity and of the difference that surrounded us and imposed new combinations. So the ancient tide rises at intervals in me and in Priscilla following the course of the Moon; so the sexed species respond to the old conditioning which prescribes ages and seasons of loves and also grants extensions and postponements to the ages and the seasons and at times becomes involved in obstinacies and coercions and vices.

In other words, Priscilla and I are only meeting places for messages from the past: not only for messages among themselves, but for messages meeting answers to messages. And as the different elements and molecules answer messages in different ways—imperceptibly or boundlessly different—so the messages vary according to the world that receives them and interprets them, or else, to remain the same, they are forced to change. You might say, then, that the messages are not messages at all, that

a past to transmit doesn't exist, and only so many futures exist which correct the course of the past, which give it form, which invent it.

The story I wanted to tell is the encounter of two individuals who don't exist, since they are definable only with regard to a past or a future, past and future whose reality is reciprocally doubted. Or else it's a story that cannot be separated from the story of all the rest of what exists, and therefore from the story of what doesn't exist and, not existing, causes what does exist to exist. All we can say is that in certain points and moments that interval of void which is our individual presence is grazed by the wave which continues to renew the combinations of molecules and to complicate them or erase them, and this is enough to give us the certitude that somebody is "I" and somebody is "Priscilla" in the temporal and spatial distribution of the living cells, and that something happens or has happened or will happen which involves us directly and—I would dare say—happily and totally. This is in itself enough, Priscilla, to cheer me, when I bend my outstretched neck over yours and I give you a little nip on your yellow fur and you dilate your nostrils, bare your teeth, and kneel on the sand, lowering your hump to the level of my breast so that I can lean on it and press you from behind, bearing down on my rear legs, oh how sweet those sunsets in the oasis you remember when they loosen the burden from the packsaddle and the caravan scatters and we camels feel suddenly light and you break into a run and I trot after you, overtaking you in the grove of palm trees.

III. Death

The risk we ran was living: living forever. The threat of continuing weighed, from the very start, on anyone who had by chance begun. The crust that covers the Earth is liquid: one drop among the many thickens, grows, little by little absorbs the substances around it, it is a drop-island, gelatinous, that contracts and expands, that occupies more space at each pulsation, it's a drop-continent that spreads its branches over the oceans, makes the poles coagulate, solidifies its mucus-green outlines on the equator, if it doesn't stop in time it gobbles up the globe. The drop will live, only that drop, forever, uniform and continuous in time and in space, a mucilaginous sphere with the Earth as its kernel, a gruel that contains the matter for the lives of us all, because we are all arrested in this drop that will never let us be born or die, so life will belong to it and to nobody else.

Luckily it is shattered. Each fragment is a chain of molecules arranged in a certain order, and thanks to the mere fact of having an order, it has only to float in the midst of the disordered substance and immediately around it other chains of molecules are formed, lined up in the same way. Each chain spreads order around itself, or rather it repeats itself over and over again, and the copies in turn are repeated, always in that geometrical arrangement. A solution of living crystals, all the same, covers the face of the Earth, it is born and dies in every moment without being aware of it, living a discontinuous and perpetual life, always identical to itself in a shattered time and space. Every other form remains shut out forever; including ours.

Up to the moment when the material necessary for self-repetition shows signs of becoming scarce, and then each chain of molecules begins to collect around itself a kind of reserve supply of substances, kept in a kind of packet with everything it needs inside. This cell grows; it grows up to a certain point; it divides in two; the two cells divide into four, into eight, into sixteen; the multiplied cells instead of undulating each by itself stick to one another like colonies or shoals or polyps. The world is covered with a forest of sponges; each sponge multiplies its cells in a network of full and empty spaces which spreads out its mesh and stirs in the currents of the sea. Each cell lives on its own and, all united, they live the unity of their lives. In the winter frost the tissues of the sponge are rent, but the newer cells remain there and start dividing again, they repeat the same sponge in spring. Now we're close to the

point and the die is cast: the sea will be drunk by their pores, it will flow into their dense passages; they will live, forever, not we, we who wait vainly for the moment to be generated by them.

But in the monstrous agglomerations of the sea's depths, in the viscous mushroom-beds that begin to crop up from the soft crust of the emergent lands, not all the cells continue to grow superimposed on one another: every now and then a swarm breaks loose, undulates, flies, comes to rest farther on; they begin to divide again, they repeat that sponge or polyp or fungus from which they came. Time now repeats itself in cycles: the phases alternate, always the same. The mushrooms scatter their spores in the wind slightly, and they grow a bit like the perishable mycelium, until other spores ripen which will die, as such, on opening. The great division within living beings has begun: the funguses that do not know death last a day and are reborn in a day, but between the part that transmits the orders of reproduction and the part that carries them out an irreconcilable gap has opened.

By now the battle is joined between those that exist and would like to be eternal and us who don't exist and would like to, at least for a little while. Fearing that a casual mistake might open the way to diversity, those who exist increase their control devices: if the reproduction orders derive from the confrontation of two distinct and identical messages, errors of transmission are more easily eliminated. So the alternation of the phases becomes complicated: from the branches of the polyp attached to the sea-bed transparent medusas are detached, which float halfway to the surface; love among the medusas begins, ephemeral play and luxury of continuity through which the polyps confirm their eternity. On the lands that have emerged, vegetable monsters open fans of leaves, spread out mossy carpets, arch their boughs on which hermaphrodite flowers blossom; so they hope to grant death only a small and hidden part of themselves, but by now the play of crossing messages has invaded the world: that will be the breach through which the crowd of us who do not exist will make our overflowing entrance.

The sea is covered with undulating eggs; a wave lifts them, mixes them with clouds of seed. Each swimming creature that slips from a fertilized egg repeats not one but two beings that were swimming there before him; he will not be the one or the other of those two but yet another, a third; that is, the original two for the first time will die, and the third for the first time has been born.

In the invisible expanse of the program-cells where all the combinations are formed or undone within the species, the original continuity still flows; but between one combination and another the interval is occupied by individuals who are mortal and sexed and different.

The dangers of life without death are avoided—they say—forever. Not because from the mud of the boiling swamps the first clot of undivided life cannot again emerge, but because we are all around now —above all, those of us who act as micro-organisms and bacteria— ready to fling ourselves on that clot and devour it. Not because the chains of the viruses don't continue repeating themselves in their exact crystalline order, but because this can happen only within our bodies and tissues, in us, the more complex animals and vegetables; so the world of the eternals has been incorporated into the world of the perishable, and their immunity to death serves to guarantee us our mortal condition. We still go swimming over depths of corals and sea anemones, we still walk and make our way through ferns and mosses under the boughs of the original forest, but sexual reproduction has now somehow entered the cycle of even the most ancient species, the spell is broken, the eternals are dead, nobody seems prepared any longer to renounce sex, even the little share of sex that falls to his lot, in order to have again a life that repeats itself interminably.

The victors—for the present—are we, the discontinuous. The swamp-forest, defeated, is still around us; we have barely opened a passage with blows of our machete in the thicket of mangrove roots; finally a glimpse of free sky opens over our heads, we raise our eyes shielding them from the sun: above us stretches another roof, the hull of words we secrete constantly. As soon as we are out of the primordial matter, we are bound in a connective tissue that fills the hiatus between our discontinuities, between

our deaths and births, a collection of signs, articulated sounds, ideograms, morphemes, numbers, punched cards, magnetic tapes, tattoos, a system of communication that includes social relations, kinship, institutions, merchandise, advertising posters, napalm bombs, namely everything that is language, in the broad sense. The danger still isn't over. We are in a state of alarm, in the forest losing its leaves. Like a duplicate of the Earth's crust, the cap is hardening over our heads: it will be a hostile envelope, a prison, if we don't find the right spot to break it, to prevent its perpetual self-repetition.

The ceiling that covers us is all jutting iron gears; it's like the belly of an automobile under which I have crawled to repair a breakdown, but I can't come out from under it because, while I'm stretched out there with my back on the ground, the car expands, extends, until it covers the whole world. There is no time to lose, I must understand the mechanism, find the place where we can get to work and stop this uncontrolled process, press the buttons that guide the passage to the following phase: that of the machines that reproduce themselves through crossed male and female messages, forcing new machines to be born and the old machines to die.

Everything at a certain point tends to cling around me, even this page where my story is seeking a finale that doesn't conclude it, a net of words where a written I and a written Priscilla meet and multiply into other words and other thoughts, where they may set into motion the chain reaction through which things done or used by men, that is, the elements of their language, can also acquire speech, where machines can speak, exchange the words by which they are constructed, the messages that cause them to move. The circuit of vital information that runs from the nucleic acids to writing is prolonged in the punched tapes of the automata, children of other automata: generations of machines, perhaps better than we, will go on living and speaking lives and words that were also ours; and translated into electronic instructions, the word "I" and the word "Priscilla" will meet again.

Part Three

t zero

t zero

I have the impression this isn't the first time I've found myself in this situation: with my bow just slackened in my outstretched left hand, my right hand drawn back, the arrow A suspended in midair at about a third of its trajectory, and, a bit farther on, also suspended in midair, and also at about a third of his trajectory, the lion L in the act of leaping upon me, jaws agape and claws extended. In a second I'll know if the arrow's trajectory and the lion's will or will not coincide at a point X crossed both by L and by A at the same second t_x, that is, if the lion will slump in the air with a roar stifled by the spurt of blood that will flood his dark throat pierced by the arrow, or whether he will fall unhurt upon me knocking me to the ground with both forepaws which will lacerate the muscular tissue of my shoulders and chest, while his mouth, closing with a simple snap of the jaws, will rip my head from my neck at the level of the first vertebra.

So many and so complex are the factors that condition the parabolic movement both of arrows and of felines that I am unable for the moment to judge which of the eventualities is the more probable. I am therefore in one of those situations of uncertainty and expectation where one really doesn't know what to think. And the thought that immediately occurs to me is this: it doesn't seem the first time to me.

With this I don't mean to refer to other hunting experiences of mine: an archer, the moment he thinks he's experienced, is lost; every lion we encounter in our brief life is different from every other lion; woe to us if we stop to make comparisons, to deduce our movements from norms and premises. I am speaking of this lion L and of this arrow A which have now reached a third, roughly, of their respective trajectories.

Nor am I to be included among those who believe in the existence of a first and absolute lion, of which all the various individual and approximate lions that jump on us are only shadows or simulacra. In our hard life there is no room for anything that isn't concrete, that can't be grasped by the senses.

Equally alien to me is the view of those who assert that each of us carries within himself from birth a memory of lion that weighs upon his dreams, inherited by sons from fathers, and so when he sees a lion he immediately and spontaneously says: Ha, a lion! I could explain why and how I have come to exclude this idea, but this doesn't seem to me the right moment.

Suffice it to say that by "lion" I mean only this yellow clump that has sprung forth from a bush in the savannah, this hoarse grunt that exhales an odor of bloody flesh, and the white fur of the belly and the pink of the under-paws and the sharp angle of the retractile claws just as I see them over me now with a mixture of sensations that I call "lion" in order to give it a name though I want it to be clear it has nothing to do with the word "lion" nor even with the idea of lion which one might form in other circumstances.

If I say this moment I am living through is not being lived for the first time by me, it's because the sensation I have of it is one of a slight doubling of images, as if at the same time I were seeing not one lion or one arrow but two or more lions and two or more arrows superimposed with a barely perceptible overlapping, so the sinuous outlines of the lion's form and the segment of the arrow seem underlined or rather haloed by finer lines and a more delicate color. The doubling, however, could be only an illusion through which I depict to myself an otherwise indefinable sense of thickness, whereby lion arrow bush are something more than this lion this arrow this bush, namely, the interminable repetition of lion arrow bush arranged in this specific relationship with an interminable repetition of myself in the moment when I have just slackened the string of my bow.

I wouldn't want this sensation as I have described it, however, to resemble too much the recognition of something already seen, arrow in that position, lion in that other and reciprocal relation between the positions of arrow and of lion and of me rooted here with the bow in my hand; I would prefer to say that what I have recognized is only the space, the point of space where the arrow is which would be empty if the arrow weren't there, the empty space which now contains the lion and the space which now contains me, as if in the void of the space we occupy or rather cross—that is, which the world occupies or rather crosses—certain points had become recognizable to me in the midst of all the other points equally empty and equally crossed by the world. And bear this in mind: it isn't that this recognition occurs in relation, for example, to the configuration of the terrain, the distance of the river or the forest: the space that surrounds us is a space that is always different, I know this quite well, I know the Earth is a heavenly body that moves in the midst of other moving heavenly bodies, I know that no sign, on the Earth or in the sky, can serve me as an absolute point of reference, I also remember that the stars turn in the wheel of the galaxy and the galaxies move away from one another at speeds proportional to the distance. But the suspicion that has gripped me is precisely this: that I have come to find myself in a space not new to me, that I have returned to a point where we had already passed by. And since it isn't merely a question of me but also of an arrow and a lion, it's no good thinking this is just chance: here time is involved, which continues to cover a trail it has already followed. I could then define as time and not as space that void I felt I recognized as I crossed it.

The question I now ask myself is if a point of time's trail can be superimposed on points of preceding passages. In this case, the impression of the images' thickness would be explained by the repeated beating of time on an identical instant. It might also be, in certain points, an occasional slight overlapping between one passage and the next: images slightly doubled or unfocused would then be the clue that the trail of time is a little worn by use and leaves a narrow margin of play around its obligatory channels. But even if it were simply a momentary optical effect, the accent remains, as of a cadence I seem to feel beating on the instant I am living through. I still wouldn't like what I have said to make this moment seem endowed with a special temporal consistency in the series of moments that precede it and follow it: from the point of view of time it is actually a moment that lasts as long as the others, indifferent to its content, suspended in its course between past and future; what it seems to me I've discovered is only its punctual recurrence in a series that is repeated, identical to itself every time.

In short, the whole problem, now that the arrow is hissing through the air and the lion arches in his spring and I still can't tell if the arrowhead dipped in serpent's venom will pierce the tawny skin between the widened eyes or will miss, abandoning my helpless viscera to the rending that will separate them from the framework of bones to which they are now anchored and will drag and scatter them over the bloodied, dusty ground until before night the vultures and the jackals will have erased the last trace, the whole problem for me is to know if the series of which this second is a part is open or closed. Because if, as I seem to have heard maintained sometimes, it is a finite series, that is if the universe's time began at a certain moment and continues in an explosion of stars and nebulae, more and more rarefied, until the moment when the dispersion will reach the extreme limit and stars and nebulae will start concentrating again, the consequence I must draw is that time will retrace its steps, that the chain of minutes will unroll in the opposite direction, until we are back at the beginning, only to start over again, and all of this will occur infinite times—and it may just be, then, that time did have a beginning: the universe does nothing but pulsate between two extreme moments, forced to repeat itself forever—just as it has already repeated itself infinite times and just as this second where I now find myself is repeated.

Let's try to look at it all clearly, then: I find myself in a random space-time intermediary point of a phase of the universe; after hundreds of millions of billions of seconds here the arrow and the lion and I and the bush have found ourselves as we now find ourselves, and this second will be promptly swallowed up and buried in the series of the hundreds of millions of billions of seconds that continues, independently of the outcome, a second from now, of the convergent or divergent flight of the lion and of the arrow; then at a certain point the course will reverse its direction, the universe will repeat its vicissitude backwards, from the effects the causes will punctually arise, so also from these effects I am waiting for and don't know, from an arrow that plows into the ground raising a yellow cloud of dust and tiny fragments of flint or else which pierces the palate of the beast like a new, monstrous tooth, we'll come back to the moment I am now living, the arrow returning to fit itself to the taut bow as if sucked back, the lion falling again behind the bush on his rear legs tensed like a spring, and all the afterward will gradually be erased second by second by the return of the before, it will be forgotten in the dispersal of billions of combinations of neurons within the lobes of brains, so that no one will know he's living in reversed time just as I myself am not now sure in which direction the time I move in is moving, and if the then I'm waiting for hasn't in reality already happened just a second ago, bearing with it my salvation or my death.

What I ask myself is whether, seeing that at this point we have to go back in any case, it wouldn't be wise for me to stop, to stop in space and in time, while the string of the barely slackened bow bends in the direction opposite to the one where it was previously tautened, and while my right foot barely lightened of the weight of the body is lifted in a ninety-degree twist, and to let it be motionless like that to wait until, from the darkness of space-time, the lion emerges again and sets himself against me with

all four legs in the air, and the arrow goes back to its place in its trajectory at the exact point where it is now. What, after all, is the use of continuing if sooner or later we will only find ourselves in this situation again? I might as well grant myself a few dozen billion years' repose, and let the rest of the universe continue its spatial and temporal race to the end, and wait for the return trip to jump on again and go back in my story and the universe's to the origin, and then begin once more to find myself here —or else let time go back by itself and let it approach me again while I stand still and wait—and then see if the right moment has come for me to make up my mind and take the next step, to go and give a look at what will happen to me in a second, or on the other hand if it's best for me to remain here definitively. For this there is no need for my material particles to be removed from their spatial-temporal course, from the bloody ephemeral victory of the hunter or of the lion: I'm sure that in any case a part of us remains entangled with each single intersection of time and space, and therefore it would be enough not to separate ourselves from this part, to identify with it, letting the rest go on turning as it must turn to the end.

In short, I am offered this possibility: to constitute a fixed point in the oscillating phases of the universe. Shall I seize the opportunity or is it best to skip it? As far as stopping goes, I might well stop not just myself, which I realize wouldn't make much sense, but stop along with me what serves to define this moment for me, arrow lion archer suspended just as we are, forever. It seems to me in fact that if the lion knew clearly how things stand, he too would surely agree to remain where he is now, at about a third of the trajectory of his furious leap, to separate himself from that self-projection which in another second will encounter the rigid jerks of the death agony or the angry crunching of a still-warm human skull. I can speak therefore not only for myself, but also in the name of the lion. And in the name of the arrow, because an arrow can wish for nothing but to be an arrow as it is in this rapid moment, postponing its destiny as blunted scrap which awaits it whichever target it may strike.

Having established, then, that the situation in which we now find ourselves, lion arrow and I in this moment t_0, will occur two times for each coming and going of time, identical to the other times, and that it has been so repeated as often as the universe has repeated its diastole and its systole in the past—if it really makes sense to speak of past and future for the succession of these phases, when we know that it doesn't make sense within the phases—an uncertainty still remains about the situation in the successive seconds t_1, t_2, t_3, et cetera, just as things were uncertain in the preceding $t\text{-}_1$, $t\text{-}_2$, $t\text{-}_3$, et cetera.

The alternatives, on closer examination, are these:

either the space-time lines that the universe follows in the phases of its pulsation coincide at every point;

or else they coincide only in certain exceptional points, such as the second I am now living in, diverging then in the others.

If the latter of these alternatives is correct, from the space-time point where I now am there extends a bundle of possibilities which, the more they proceed in time, the more they diverge, conelike, toward futures which are completely different from one another, and each time I find myself here with the arrow and the lion in the air will correspond to a different point X of intersection in their trajectories, each time the lion will be wounded in a different way, he will have a different agony or will find to a different extent new strength to react, or he won't be wounded at all and will fling himself upon me each time in a different way leaving me possibilities of self-defense or not leaving them, and my victories and my defeats in the struggle with the lion prove to be potentially infinite, so the more times I am disemboweled the more probabilities I'll have of hitting the target the next time I find myself here billions and billions of years later, thus I can express no opinion on this present situation of mine

because in the event that I am living the fraction of time immediately preceding the clawing of the beast this would be the last moment of a happy period, whereas if what awaits me is the triumph with which the tribe welcomes the victorious lion hunter, what I'm now living is the climax of anguish, the blackest point of the descent to hell which I must make in order to deserve the coming apotheosis. Therefore it's best for me to flee from this situation whatever may be in store for me, because if there's one interval of time that really counts for nothing it's this very moment, definable only in relation to what follows it, that is to say this second in itself doesn't exist, and so there is no possibility not only of staying in it but even of crossing it for the duration of a second, in short it is a jump of time between the moment in which the lion and the arrow took flight and the moment when a spurt of blood will burst from the lion's veins or from mine.

Consider, too, that if from this second infinite lines of possible futures move out in a cone, the same lines arrive obliquely from a past that is also a cone of infinite possibilities, therefore the I who is now here with the lion plunging on him from above and with the arrow cutting its way through the air is a different I every time because past mother father tribe language age experience are different each time, the lion is always another lion even if I see him just like this each time, with his tail which has curved in the leap till the tuft is near the right flank in a movement that could be a lash or a caress, with the mane so open that it covers a great part of the breast and the torso from my sight and allows only the forepaws to emerge laterally raised as if preparing for me a joyous embrace but in reality ready to plunge the claws in my shoulders with all their strength, and the arrow is made of material that is always different, tipped with different heads, poisoned by dissimilar serpents, though always crossing the air in the same parabola and with the same hiss. What doesn't change is the relation between me arrow lion in this moment of uncertainty which is repeated exactly, an uncertainty whose stake is death, but we must agree that if this menacing death is the death of a me with a different past, of a me that yesterday morning didn't go Out to gather roots with my girl cousin, that is rightly speaking another me, a stranger, perhaps a stranger who yesterday morning went gathering roots with my girl cousin, therefore an enemy, in any case if here in my place the other times instead of me there was somebody else, it doesn't then matter much to know if the time before or the time after the arrow struck the lion or not.

In this case, then, it's out of the question that stopping in t_0 for the whole cycle of space and time could have any interest for me. However, the other hypothesis still remains: as in the old geometry lines had only to coincide in two points to coincide in all, so it may be that the spatio-temporal lines drawn by the universe in its alternating phases coincide in all their points and therefore not only t_0 but also t_1 and t_2 and everything that will come afterward will coincide with the respective t_1 t_2 t_3 of the other phases, and likewise all the preceding and following seconds, and I will be reduced to having a sole past and a sole future repeated infinite times before and after this moment. One might, however, wonder whether there is any sense in speaking of repetition when time consists in a single series of points not allowing variations in their nature or in their succession: it would then suffice to say that time is finite and always equal to itself, and can thus be considered as given contemporaneously in all its extent forming a pile of layers of present; in other words, we have a time that is absolutely full, since each of the moments into which it can be broken down constitutes a kind of layer that stays there continuously present, inserted among other layers also continuously present. In short, the second t_0 in which we have the arrow A_0 and a bit farther on the lion L_0 and here the me Q_0 is a space-time layer that remains motionless and identical forever, and next to it there is placed t_1 with the arrow A_1 and the lion L_1 and the me Q_1 who have slightly changed their positions, and beside that there is t_2 which contains A_2 and L_2 and Q_2 and so on. In one of these seconds placed in line it is clear who lives and who dies between

the lion L_n and the me Q_n, and in the following seconds there are surely taking place either the tribe's festivities for the hunter who returns with the lion's remains or the funeral of the hunter as through the savannah spreads the terror of the prowling murderous lion. Each second is definitive, closed, without interferences from the others, and I, Qo, here in my territory t_0 can be absolutely calm and take no interest in what is simultaneously happening to Q_1 Q_2 Q_3 Q_n in the respective seconds near mine, because in reality the lions L_1 L_2 L_3 L_n can never take the place of the familiar and still-inoffensive though menacing L_0, held at bay by an arrow in flight A_0 still containing in itself that mortal power that might prove wasted by A_1 A_2 A_3 A_n in their arrangement in segments of the trajectory more and more distant from the target, ridiculing me as the most clumsy archer of the tribe, or rather ridiculing as clumsy that $Q\text{-}_n$ who in $t\text{-}_n$ takes aim with his bow.

I know the comparison with the frames of a movie film emerges spontaneously, but if I've avoided using it so far you can be sure I've had my reasons. It's true that each second is closed in itself and incommunicable with the others exactly as in a film frame, but to define its content the points Q_0 L_0 A_0 are not enough: with them we would limit it to a little lion-hunting scene, dramatic if you like but surely not displaying a very broad horizon; what must be considered contemporaneously is the totality of the points contained in the universe in that second t_0 not excluding even one, and then it's best to put the film frame right out of your head because it just confuses things.

So now that I have decided to inhabit forever this second t_0—and if I hadn't decided to it would be the same thing because as Q_0 I can inhabit no other—I have ample leisure to look around and to contemplate my second to its full extent. It encompasses on my right a river blackish with hippopotamuses, on my left the savannah blackish-white with zebras, and scattered at various points along the horizon some baobab trees blackish-yellow with toucans, each of these elements marked by the positions occupied respectively by the hippopotamuses $H(a)_0$, $H(b)_0$, $H(c)_0$ et cetera, by the zebras Z(a)o, $Z(b)_0$, $Z(c)_0$ et cetera, the toucans $T(a)_0$, $T(b)_0$, $T(c)_0$ et cetera. It further embraces hut villages and warehouses of importers and exporters, plantations that conceal underground thousands of seeds at different moments of the process of germination, endless deserts with the position of each grain of sand $G(a)_0$ $G(b)_0$ . . . $G(n^m)_0$ transported by the wind, cities at night with lighted windows and dark windows, cities during the day with red and yellow and green traffic lights, production graphs, price indices, stock market figures, epidemics of contagious diseases with the position of each virus, local wars with volleys of bullets $B(a)_0$ $B(b)_0$ . . . $B(z)_0$ $B(zz)_0$ $B(zzz)_0$ . . . suspended in their trajectory, bullets which may strike the enemies $E(a)_0$ $E(b)_0$ $E(c)_0$ hidden among the leaves, airplanes with clusters of just-released bombs suspended beneath them, airplanes with clusters of bombs waiting to be released, total war implicit in the international situation $(IS)_0$ which at some unknown moment $(IS)_X$ will become explicit total war, explosions of supernovae which might change radically the configuration of our galaxy . . .

Each second is a universe, the second I live is the second I live in, la seconde que je vis c'est la seconde où je demeure, I must get used to conceiving my speech simultaneously in all possible languages if I want to live my universe-instant extensively. Through the combination of all contemporaneous data I could achieve an objective knowledge of the universe-instant t_0 in all its spatial extension, me included, since inside t_0 I, Q_0, am not in the least determined by my past Q_{-1} Q_{-2} $Q\text{-}_3$ et cetera but by the system composed of all the toucans To, bullets B_0, viruses V_0, without which the fact that I am Q_0 could not be

established. For that matter, since I no longer have to worry about what will happen to Q_1 Q_2 Q_3 et cetera, there's no use in my assuming the subjective point of view that has guided me so far, now I can identify myself with myself as well as with the lion or with the grain of sand or the cost-of-living index or with the enemy or with the enemy's enemy.

To do this I must establish exactly the co-ordinates of all these points and I must calculate certain constants. I could for example emphasize all the components of suspense and uncertainty that obtain both for me and for the lion the arrow the bombs the enemy and the enemy's enemy, and define t_0 as a moment of universal suspense and uncertainty. But this still tells me nothing substantial about t_0 because granted it is indeed a terrifying moment as I believe is now proved, it could also be just one terrifying moment in a series of moments of mounting terror or equally a terrifying moment in a series of decreasing and therefore illusory terror. In other words this established but relative terror of t_0 can assume completely different values, since t_1 t_2 t_3 can transform the substance of t_0 in a radical manner, or to put it more clearly there are the various t_1's of Q_1, L_1, $E(a)_1$, $E(I/a)_1$ which have the power to determine the fundamental qualities of t_0.

And here, it seems to me, things start becoming complicated: my line of conduct is to close myself in t_0 and to know nothing of what happens outside of this second, giving up a limited personal point of view in order to live t_0 in all its global objective configuration, but this objective configuration can be grasped not from within t_0 but only by observing it from another universe-instant, for example from t_1 or from t_2, and not from all their extension contemporaneously but by adopting decisively one point of view, that of the enemy or of the enemy's enemy, that of the lion or that of myself.

To sum up: to stay in t_0 I must establish an objective configuration of t_0; to establish an objective configuration of t_0 I must move to t_1; to move into t_1 I must adopt some kind of subjective viewpoint so I might as well keep my own. To sum up further: to stay still in time I must move with time, to become objective I must remain subjective.

Now let's see how I must behave practically: it remains established that I as Q_0 retain my residence in t_0, but I could meanwhile make the quickest possible dash into t_1 and if that isn't enough proceed on to t_2 and t_3, identifying myself temporarily with Q_1 Q_2Q_3, all this naturally in the hope that the Q series continues and isn't prematurely cut off by the curved claws of L_1 L_2 L_3, because only in this way could I realize how my position of Q_0 in t_0 is really constituted which is the only thing that should matter to me.

But the danger I risk is that the content of t_1, of the universe-instant t_1, is so much more interesting, so much richer than t_0, in emotions and surprises either triumphant or disastrous, that I might be tempted to devote myself entirely to t_1, turning my back on t_0, forgetting that I had moved to t_1 only to gain more information on t_0. And in this curiosity about t_1, in this illegitimate desire for knowledge about a universe-instant that isn't mine, in wanting to discover if I would really be making a good bargain trading my stable and secure citizenship of t_0 for that modicum of novelty that t_1 could offer me, I might take a step into t_2 just to have a more objective notion of t_1; and that step into t_2 might, in turn . . .

If this is how things stand I realize that my situation won't change in the least even if I abandon the hypotheses from which I set out: that is, supposing time knows no repetitions and consists of an irreversible series of seconds each different from the other, and each second happens once and for all, and living in it for its exact length of one second means living in it forever, and t_0 interests me only with regard to the t_1 t_2 t_3's that follow it with their content of life or death in consequence of the movement I performed in shooting the arrow and the movement that the lion performed in making his leap and also of the other movements the lion and I will make in the next seconds and of the fear that for the whole duration of an interminable second keeps me petrified and keeps petrified the lion in midair and the arrow in my sight and the second t_0 swift as it came now swiftly clicks into the following second and traces with no further doubts the trajectory of the lion and of the arrow . . .

The Chase

That car that is chasing me is faster than mine; inside there is one man, alone, armed with a pistol, a good shot, as I have seen from the bullets which missed me by fractions of an inch. In my escape I have headed for the center of the city; it was a healthy decision; the pursuer is constantly behind me but we are separated by several other cars; we have stopped at a traffic signal, in a long column.

The signal is regulated in such a way that on our side the red light lasts a hundred and eighty seconds and the green light a hundred and twenty, no doubt based on the premise that the perpendicular traffic is heavier and slower. A mistaken premise: calculating the cars I see going by transversely when it is green for them, I would say they are about twice the number of those that in an equally long period manage to break free of our column and pass the signal. This doesn't mean that, once beyond it, they speed: in reality they go on forward with exasperating slowness, which can be considered speed only compared to us since we are virtually motionless with red and green alike. It is also partially the fault of this slowness of theirs that we don't succeed in moving, because when the green goes off for them and comes on for us the intersection is still occupied by their wave, blocked there in the center, and thus at least thirty of our hundred and twenty seconds are lost before a single tire can revolve once here on our side. It must be said that the transverse flow does indeed inflict this delay on us but then it is compensated for by a loss of forty and sometimes sixty seconds before starting again when the green comes on once more for them, thanks to the trail of traffic jams that each of our slow waves drags after it: a loss for them which doesn't actually mean a gain for us because every final delay on our side (and initial delay on the other) corresponds to a greater final delay on the other side (and initial on ours), and this in mounting proportion, so that the green light period remains a deadlock for a longer and longer time on both sides, and this deadlock works more against our progress than theirs.

I realize that when, in this description, I oppose "us" and "them" I include in the term "us" both myself and the man who is chasing me in order to kill me, as if the boundary line of enmity passed not between me and him but rather between those in our column and those in the transverse one. But for all who are here immobilized and impatient, with their feet on the clutch, thoughts and feelings can follow no other course but the one imposed by the respective situations in the currents of traffic; it is therefore admissible to suppose that a community of intention is established between me, who cannot wait to dash away, and him who is waiting for a repetition of his previous opportunity, when in a street on the city's outskirts he managed to fire at me two shots that missed me by sheerest luck, since one bullet shattered the glass of the left side window and the other lodged here in the roof.

It should be added that the community implied in the term "us" is only apparent, because in practice my enmity extends not only to the cars that cross our column but also those in it; and inside our column I feel definitely more hostile toward the cars that precede me and prevent me from advancing than toward those following me, which however would make themselves declared enemies if they tried to pass me, a difficult undertaking in view of the dense jam where every car is stuck fast among the others with a minimum freedom of movement.

In short, the man who at this moment is my mortal enemy is now lost among many other solid bodies where my chafing aversion and fear are also perforce distributed, just as his murderous will though directed exclusively against me is somehow scattered and deflected among a great number of intermediary objects. It is certain in any case that he too, in the calculations he is making simultaneously with me, calls our column "us" and calls "them" the column that crosses ours, just as it is certain that our calculations, though aiming finally at opposite results, have many elements and developments in common.

I want our column to have first a fast movement, then a very slow one, or in other words that the cars in front of me should suddenly start speeding and then after them I too could pass the intersection on the last flicker of green; so then immediately behind my back the line would be blocked for a period of time long enough to allow me to vanish, turn off into a secondary cross street. In all likelihood my pursuer's calculations tend instead to foresee whether he will manage to pass the signal in the same wave with me, if he will succeed in keeping behind me until the cars that separate us are scattered in various directions or at least more thinned out, and if his car will then be able to take its place immediately behind or beside mine, for example in the column at another signal, in a good position to empty his pistol at me (I am unarmed) a second before the green comes on to give him a clear avenue of escape.

In other words, I am relying on the irregularity with which the column's periods of immobility alternate with periods of movement; he on the other hand is counting on the regularity which can be found on an average between periods of movement and periods of immobility for each automobile in the column. The problem then is whether the column is divisible into a series of segments each endowed with a life of its own or whether it must be considered a single indivisible body where the only change one can hope for is a decrease in density as the hours of night approach, to an extreme of rarefaction where only our two cars will remain headed in the same direction and the distance will tend to disappear . . . What our calculations surely have in common is that in both of them the elements that determine the individual motion of our automobiles—power of the respective motors and ability of the drivers—count almost for nothing now, and what decides everything is the general movement of the column, or rather the combined movement of the various columns that intersect one another in the city. In short, I and the man commissioned to kill me are as if immobilized in a space that moves on its own, we are soldered to this pseudo-space which breaks up and re-forms and *on* whose combinations our fate depends.

To evade this situation the simplest method would be to get out of the car. If one or both of us left our automobiles and proceeded on foot, then space would exist again and the possibility of our moving in space. But we are in a street where parking is forbidden; we would have to leave the cars in the midst of the traffic (both his and mine are stolen cars, destined to be abandoned at random when they are no longer of use to us); I could slip away on all fours among the automobiles to keep from exposing myself to his aim, but such an escape would attract attention and I would immediately have the police on my heels. Now I not only cannot seek the protection of the police, but I must also avoid in every way arousing their curiosity; so obviously I mustn't get out of my car even if he leaves his.

My first fear, the moment we found ourselves trapped here, was of seeing him come forward on foot, alone and free in the midst of hundreds of people nailed to their wheels, calmly reviewing the row of

cars and, on reaching mine, firing at me whatever bullets remain in his magazine, then running off and escaping. My fears were not unfounded: in the rear-view mirror I was not long in seeing the form of my pursuer extending from the half-open door of his car and stretching his neck above the expanse of metal roofs like someone trying to understand the reason for such an unnaturally prolonged stop; indeed, after a little while I saw his slender figure slip from the vehicle, move a few steps crosswise among the cars. But at that moment the column stirred in one of its intermittent hints of movement; from the line behind his empty car an angry honking rose, and already drivers and passengers were jumping out yelling and making threatening gestures. Certainly they would have chased him and brought him back by force to bend his head over the wheel if he hadn't hastened to resume his seat and put the car in gear, allowing the rest of the line to benefit from the new step forward, short as it was. On this score I can rest assured then: we cannot separate ourselves from our cars, not for a single moment, my pursuer will never dare overtake me on foot because even if he were in time to shoot me he couldn't then elude the fury of the other drivers, ready perhaps even to lynch him, not so much for the homicide in itself as for the traffic jam the two cars—his and the dead man's —would cause, stopped in the middle of the street.

I try to explore every hypothesis because the more details I can foresee the more probabilities I have of saving myself. For that matter what else could I do? We aren't moving, not an inch. So far I have considered the column as a linear continuum or else as a fluid current where the individual automobiles flow in disorder. The moment has come to make it clear that in our column the cars are arranged side by side in three lanes and that the alternation of periods of immobility and of movement in each of the three does not correspond with the other two, so that there are moments when only the right-hand line goes forward, or else the center line which is in fact the line where both I and my potential murderer are. If I have neglected such an outstanding element so far it isn't only because the three lines have gradually come to a regular arrangement and I myself was late in noticing it, but also because in reality this fact doesn't modify the situation for better or for worse. Certainly the difference in speed among the various lines would be decisive if the pursuer at a certain point could, for example advancing with the right-hand line, bring his car up beside mine, shoot, and continue on his way. This, however, is also an eventuality that can be excluded: even admitting that from the center line he might manage to force his way into one of the side lines (the cars proceed almost with their bumpers touching but if you know how you can exploit the moment when a little interval opens in the next line between a nose and a tail and can stick your own nose in without minding the protests of dozens of horns), keeping my eye on him in my rear-view mirror I would notice his maneuver before it was completed and I would have plenty of time, given the distance between us, to find a hasty solution with a similar move. I could, that is, slip into the same line, left or right, where he had moved, and thus I would go on preceding him at the same speed; or else I could shift my position to the outside line on the other side, if he moved to the left I could go to the right, and then we would be separated not only by a distance in the direction of traffic but also by a latitudinal division which would immediately become an insuperable barrier.

Let's assume in any case that we could finally be abreast in two adjacent lines; shooting at me isn't just something that he could do at any moment, without risking being blocked in the line waiting for the police with a corpse at the wheel of the neighboring car. Before the opportunity arose for rapid safe action the pursuer would have to stick to my side for God knows how long; and in the meanwhile since the relative speeds of the various lines change irregularly our cars would not stay long at the same level; I could regain my advantage and that wouldn't be too bad because we would go back to our previous position; the greatest risk for my pursuer would be for his line to advance while mine remained behind.

With the pursuer preceding me, I would no longer be pursued. And I could also, to make my new situation conclusive, move into his same line, putting a certain number of cars between him and me. He

would be forced to follow the stream, with no possibility of reversing his direction, and by falling in behind him I would be definitively safe. At the signal, seeing him go in one direction, I would take the other, and we would be separated forever.

Anyway, all these hypothetical maneuvers should take into account the fact that, on reaching the signal, those in the right-hand line are obliged to turn right, and those in the left, to turn left (the jam at the intersection allows no second thoughts), whereas those in the center are able at the last moment to choose what they want to do. This is the real reason why both he and I are quite careful not to leave the center line: I want to retain my freedom of choice to the last minute, he wants to be ready to turn in the direction where he sees I have turned.

Suddenly I feel gripped by a gust of enthusiasm: we are really the most alert, my pursuer and I, having placed ourselves in the center line. It's wonderful to know that freedom still exists and at the same time to feel oneself surrounded and protected by a blockade of solid and impenetrable bodies, and to have no concern beyond raising the left foot from the clutch, pressing the right foot on the accelerator for an instant and immediately raising it and lowering the left again on the clutch, actions which above all are not decided by us but dictated by the traffic's general pace.

I am experiencing a moment of well-being and optimism. Basically our movement is equivalent to all other movement, that is, it consists in occupying the space before us and in causing it to flow behind us, and so the moment an empty space is formed in front of me I occupy it, otherwise somebody else would hasten to occupy it; the only possible action on space is the negation of space, I negate it the moment it gives a sign of forming and then I allow it to be formed again behind me where there is immediately somebody else who negates it. In short, this space is never seen and perhaps it doesn't exist, it is only an extension of objects and a measure of distances, the distance between me and my pursuer consists in the number of cars in the line between me and him, and since this number is constant our pursuit is only a pursuit after a manner of speaking, just as it would be difficult to establish that two travelers seated in two coaches of the same train are pursuing each other.

If, however, the number of these interval-cars were to increase or diminish, then our pursuit would once again be a real pursuit, independently of our speeds or our freedom of movement. Now I must once again pay close attention: both eventualities have some likelihood of taking place. Between the position where I am now and the intersection controlled by the signal I notice that a secondary street debouches, almost an alley, from which comes a thin but steady trickle of cars. It would suffice for some of these incoming cars to be inserted between me and him, and immediately my separation would increase, it would be as if I had spurted forward in sudden flight. On our left, instead, in the middle of the street a narrow island set aside for parking now begins; if there are free places or if places become free it would suffice for some of the interval-cars to decide to park and then all of a sudden my pursuer would find the distance separating us shortened.

I must discover a solution in a hurry, and since the only field open to me is the field of theory, I can only go on extending my theoretical knowledge of the situation. Reality, ugly or beautiful as it may be, is something I cannot change: that man has been given the job of overtaking me and killing me, whereas I have been told I can do nothing but run away; these instructions remain valid even in the event that space is abolished in one or in all of its dimensions whereby motion would remain impossible; this doesn't mean I would stop being the pursued or he the pursuer.

I must bear in mind at the same time two types of relationship: on one hand the system that includes all the vehicles simultaneously moving in the center of a city where the total surface of the automobiles equals and perhaps exceeds the total surface of the streets; on the other hand the system created between an armed pursuer and an unarmed pursued man. Now these two types of relationship tend to become identified in the sense that the second is contained in the first as in a recipient which gives it its

form and makes it invisible, so that an outside observer is unable to distinguish in the river of identical cars the two which are involved in a lethal pursuit, in a mad race that is hidden within this unbearable stasis.

Let's try to examine each element calmly: a pursuit should consist in the confrontation of the speeds of two bodies moving in space, but since we have seen that a space does not exist independently of the bodies that occupy it, the pursuit will consist only in a series of variations in the relative positions of such bodies. It is the bodies therefore that determine the surrounding space, and if this affirmation seems to contradict both my experience and my pursuer's—since the two of us can't determine anything at all, neither space to flee in nor space to pursue in—it is because we are dealing with a property not of single bodies but of the whole complex of bodies in their reciprocal relationships, in their moments of initiative and of indecision, of starting the motor, in their flashing of lights and honking and biting nails and constant angry shifts of gear: neutral, first, second, neutral; neutral, first, second, neutral . . .

Now that we have abolished the concept of space (I think my pursuer in these periods of waiting must also have reached the same conclusions as I) and now that the concept of motion no longer implies the continuous passage of a body through a series of points but only disconnected and irregular displacements of bodies that occupy this point or that, perhaps I will succeed in accepting more patiently the slowness of the line, because what counts is the relative space that is defined and transformed around my car as around every other car in this traffic jam. In short, each car is in the center of a system of relationships which in practice is the equivalent of another, that is, the cars are interchangeable, I mean the cars each with its driver inside; each driver could perfectly well change places with another driver, I with my neighbors and my pursuer with his.

In these shifts of position preferred directions can be discerned locally: for example our line's direction of movement, which even if it doesn't really imply it is moving nevertheless excludes the possibility that one can move in the opposite direction. For us two, then, the direction of pursuit is the preferred one, in fact the only exchange of positions that cannot take place is an exchange between us, or any other exchange in contradiction with our chase. This demonstrates that in this world of interchangeable appearances the pursuer-pursued relationship continues to be the only reality we can rely on.

The point is this: if every car—direction of movement and direction of pursuit remaining constant—is equal to every other car, the properties of any one car can also be attributed to the others. Therefore nothing rules out the possibility that these lines of cars are all formed of cars being pursued, that each of these cars is fleeing as I am fleeing the threat of an aimed pistol in any one of the cars that follow. Nor can I exclude the further possibility that each car is pursuing another car with homicidal intentions, and that all of a sudden the center of the city will be transformed into a battlefield or the scene of a massacre. Whether this is true or not, the behavior of the cars around me would be no different from what it is now, therefore I am entitled to insist on my hypothesis and to follow the relative positions of any two cars in their various moments, attributing to one the role of the pursued and to the other that of the pursuer. Above all, it is a game that can serve very well to while away the waiting: I have only to interpret every change of position in the lines as an episode in a hypothetical pursuit. For example, now as one of the interval-cars starts flashing its signal light to turn left because it has seen a free space in the parking island, instead of being concerned only with my advantage which is about to be reduced, I can very easily think this is a maneuver in another pursuit, the move of one pursued or of one pursuer among the countless others who surround me, and thus the situation in which so far I have lived subjectively, nailed to my solitary fear, is projected outside me, extended to the general system of which we are all parts.

This isn't the first time that an interval-car has abandoned its place; on one side the parking area and on the other the right-hand line, slightly faster, seem to exercise a strong attraction on the automobiles behind me. As I have continued following the thread of my deductions, the relative space that

surrounds me has undergone various changes: at a certain point even my pursuer moved to the right and, exploiting an advance of that line, passed a couple of cars in the central line; then I moved to the right, too; he went back into the central line and I too went back to the center, but I had to drop one car behind whereas he moved forward three. These are all things that before would have made me very uneasy, whereas now they interest me chiefly as special elements in the general system of pursuits whose properties I am trying to establish.

On thinking it over, I deduce that if all the cars are involved in pursuits, the pursuing property would have to be commutative, and anyone who pursues would have to be in his turn pursued and anyone who is pursued would also be pursuing. Among the cars, then, a uniformity and symmetry of relationships would be a-chieved, where the only difficult element to determine would be the pursued-pursuer interval in each chain of pursuits. In fact this interval could be perhaps twenty cars or perhaps forty, or else none, as—from what I see in the mirror—is now my case: at this very moment my pursuer has gained the position directly behind mine.

I should therefore consider myself defeated and admit that I now have left only a few minutes to live, unless in developing my hypothesis I can come upon some saving solution. For example, let's suppose the car pursuing me has behind it a chain of pursuing cars: exactly one second before my pursuer shoots, the pursuer of my pursuer could overtake him and kill him, saving my life. But if two seconds before that happened the pursuer of my pursuer were overtaken and killed by his pursuer, my pursuer would then be saved and free to kill me. A perfect system of pursuits should be based on a simple concatenation of functions: each pursuer has the job of preventing the pursuer ahead of him from shooting his victim, and he has one single means of doing this, namely, by shooting him. The whole problem then lies in knowing at which link the chain will break, because starting from the point where one pursuer succeeds in killing another, then the following pursuer, no longer having to prevent that homicide since it has already been committed, will give up the idea of shooting, and the pursuer who comes after him will have no further reason for shooting since the murder he was to prevent will no longer take place, and thus going back along the chain there will be no more pursued or pursuers.

But if I admit the existence of a chain of pursuits behind me there is no reason why this chain should not also continue through me into the part of the line that precedes me. Now that the signal is turning green and it is probable that in this very period of free movement I can succeed in pushing my way into the intersection where my fate will be decided, I realize the decisive element is not behind me but in my relationship with the man ahead of me. So the only significant alternative is whether my condition of pursued man is destined to remain terminal and asymmetrical (which would seem proved by the fact that in the relationship with my pursuer I am unarmed) or if I too in my turn am a pursuer. If I examine the data of the question more closely one of the hypotheses that occurs is this: I may have been given the assignment of killing a person but not the possibility of using weapons against anyone else for whatever reason: in this case I would be armed only for my victim and disarmed for all the others.

To discover if this hypothesis corresponds to the truth, I have only to extend my hand: if in the glove compartment of my car there is a pistol it is a sign that I too am a pursuer. I have time to check this: I have been unable to take advantage of the green light because the car ahead of me was blocked by the diagonal flow and now the red light has come on again. The perpendicular flow resumes; the car preceding me is in a nasty position, having passed the line of the signal; the driver turns to see if he can back up, he sees me, has an expression of terror. He is the enemy whom I have hunted through all the city and whom I have patiently followed in this long slow line. My right hand, gripping the pistol with its silencer, rests on the gearshift. In the little mirror I see my pursuer aiming at me.

The green comes on, I put the car into gear, racing the engine, I pull down hard with my left hand and at the same time I raise my right to the window and I shoot. The man I was pursuing slumps over the wheel. The man who was pursuing me lowers his pistol, now useless. I have already turned into the

cross street. Absolutely nothing has changed: the line moves in little, irregular shifts of position, I am still prisoner of the general system of moving cars, where neither pursuers nor pursued can be distinguished.

The Night Driver

As soon as I am outside the city I realize night has fallen. I turn on my headlights. I am driving from A to B, along a three-lane superhighway, the kind where the center lane is used for passing in both directions. For night driving our eyes, too, must remove one kind of inner transparency and fit on another, because they no longer have to make an effort to distinguish among the shadows and the fading colors of the evening landscape the little speck of the distant cars which are coming toward us or preceding us, but they have to check a kind of black slate which requires a different method of reading, more precise but also simplified, since the darkness erases all the picture's details which might be distracting and underlines only the indispensable elements, the white stripes on the asphalt, the headlights' yellow glow, and the little red dots. It's a process that occurs automatically, and if I am led to reflect on it this evening it's because now that the external possibilities of distraction diminish, the internal ones get the upper hand within me, and my thoughts race on their own in a circuit of alternatives and doubts I can't disengage; in other words, I have to make a special effort to concentrate on my driving.

I climbed into the car suddenly, after a quarrel over the telephone with Y. I live in A, Y lives in B. I wasn't planning to visit her this evening. But during our daily phone call we said dire things to each other; in the end, carried away by my exasperation, I told Y that I wanted to break off our affair; Y answered that it didn't matter to her and that she would immediately telephone Z, my rival. At this point one of us—I don't remember whether it was she or I—hung up. Before a minute had passed I realized the motive of our quarrel was trifling compared to the consequences it was creating. To call Y back on the telephone would have been a mistake; the only way to resolve the question was to dash over to B and have a face-to-face explanation with her. So here I am on this superhighway I have driven over hundreds of times at every hour in every season but which never seemed so long to me before.

Or, to put it more clearly, I feel as if I had lost all sense of space and of time: the glowing cones projected by the headlights make the outlines of places sink into vagueness; the numbers of the miles on the signs and the numbers that click over on the dashboard are data that mean nothing to me, that do not respond to the urgency of my questions about what Y is doing at this moment, about what she is thinking. Did she really mean to call Z or was it only a threat, blurted out like that, out of pique? And if she was serious, did she do it immediately after our telephone conversation, or is she thinking it over for a moment, letting her anger subside before she makes up her mind? Like me, Z lives in A; for years he has loved Y hopelessly; if she has telephoned him and invited him over, he has surely set out at top speed toward B in his car; therefore he too is speeding along this superhighway; every car that passes me could be his, as well as every car I pass. It is difficult to be certain: the cars going in the same direction as mine are two red lights when they precede me and two yellow eyes when I see them following me in my rear-view mirror. At the moment of passing I can make out at most what kind of car it is and how many people are inside it, but the cars carrying only their driver are the great majority, and as far as the model is concerned I don't believe Z's automobile is particularly recognizable.

As if that weren't enough, it's begun to rain. My field of vision is reduced to the semicircle of glass swept by the windshield wiper, all the rest is streaked or opaque darkness, the information I receive from outside consists only of yellow and red flashes distorted by a tumult of drops. The only thing I can

do with Z is try to pass him and not let him pass me, in whatever car he is, but I won't be able to know if he is here and which car is his. I feel all the cars going in A's direction are equally hostile: every car faster than mine that beats eagerly with its flipper in my mirror asking me to give way causes me a pang of jealousy; and every time I see ahead of me the distance diminish between me and the rear lights of a rival, with an upsurge of triumph I hurl myself into the center lane to reach Y before him.

Only a few minutes' advantage would be enough for me: seeing how promptly I have rushed to her, Y will immediately forget the causes of our quarrel; everything between us will again be as it was before; when Z arrives he will realize he was called into question only because of a kind of game between the two of us; he'll feel he's an intruder. Or perhaps Y at this moment has already regretted everything she said to me, has tried to call me back on the phone, or else she, like me, has decided the best thing was to come in person and has got into her car and is now racing in the direction opposite mine along this superhighway.

Now I have stopped paying attention to the cars going in my direction and I keep looking at those coming toward me which for me consist only in a double star of headlights which dilates until it sweeps the darkness from my field of vision then suddenly disappears behind me dragging a kind of underwater luminescence after it. Y's car is a very common model; like mine, for that matter. Each of these luminous apparitions could be Y speeding toward me, at each one I feel my blood stir as if in an intimacy destined to remain secret, the amorous message addressed exclusively to me is mingled with all the other messages speeding along the superhighway, and yet I couldn't desire from her a message different from this one.

I realize that in rushing toward Y what I desire most is not to find Y at the end of my race: I want Y to be racing toward me, this is the answer I need; what I mean is, I want her to know I'm racing toward her but at the same time I want to know she's racing toward me. The sole thought that comforts me is also the thought that torments me most: the thought that if Y at this moment is speeding toward A, then each time she sees the headlights of a car speeding toward B she will ask herself whether it's I racing toward her, and she will desire it to be I, and she will never be sure. Now two cars going in opposite directions have found themselves for a moment side by side, a flash has illuminated the raindrops, the sound of the motors has become fused as in an abrupt gust of wind: perhaps it was the two of us, or rather it is certain that one car was I and the other car could be she, that is the one I want to be she, the sign in which I want to recognize her, though it is this very sign that makes her unrecognizable to me. Speeding along the superhighway is the only method we have left, she and I, to express what we have to say to each other, but we cannot communicate it or receive the communication as long as we are speeding.

Of course I took my place behind the wheel in order to reach her as fast as possible; but the more I go forward the more I realize that the moment of arrival is not the real end of my race. Our meeting, with all the inessential details a meeting involves, the minute network of sensations and meanings and memories that would spread out before me—the room with the philodendron, the opaline lamp, the earrings—and the things I would say to her, some of which would surely be mistaken or mistakable, and the things she would say, to some extent surely jarring or in any case not what I expect, and all the succession of unpredictable consequences that each gesture and each word involved would raise around the things that we have to say to each other, or rather that we want to hear each other say, a storm of such noise that our communication already difficult over the telephone would become even more hazardous, stifled, buried as if under an avalanche of sand. This is why, rather than go on talking, I felt the need to transform the things to be said into a cone of light hurled at a hundred miles an hour, *to* transform myself into this cone of light moving over the superhighway, because it is certain that such a signal can be received and understood by her without being lost in the ambiguous disorder of secondary vibrations, just as I, to receive and understand the things she has to say to me, would like them to be

only (rather, I would like her to be only) this cone of light I see advancing on the superhighway at a speed (I'm guessing, at a glance) of eighty or ninety. What counts is communicating the indispensable, skipping all the superfluous, reducing ourselves to essential communication, to a luminous signal that moves in a given direction, abolishing the complexity of our personalities and situations and facial expressions, leaving them in the shadowy container that the headlights carry behind them and conceal. The Y I love is really that moving band of luminous rays, and all the rest of her can remain implicit; and the me that she can love, the me that has the power of entering that circuit of exaltation which is her affective life, in the flashing of this pass which, through love of her and with a certain risk, I am now attempting.

And also with Z (I haven't forgotten Z for a moment) I can establish the proper relationship only if he is for me simply the flash and glare that follow me, or the taillights I follow: because if I start taking into consideration his person, with its pathetic—shall we say—element but also with its undeniably unpleasant aspect, though it is—I must admit—also excusable, with all his boring story of unhappy love and his way of behaving which is always a bit questionable . . . well, there's no telling where I would end. Instead, while things continue like this, all is well: Z trying to pass me or allowing himself to be passed by me (but I don't know if it is he), Y hastening toward me (but I don't know if it's she) repentant and again in love, I hurrying to her, jealous and eager (but I'm unable to let her or anyone else know).

Naturally, if I were absolutely alone on this superhighway, if I saw no other cars speeding in either direction, then everything would be much clearer, I would be certain that Z hasn't moved to supplant me, nor has Y moved to make peace with me, facts I might register as positive or negative in my accounting, but which would in any case leave no room for doubt. And yet if I had the power of exchanging my present state of uncertainty for such a negative certainty, I would refuse the bargain without hesitation. The ideal condition for excluding every doubt would prevail if in this part of the world there existed only three automobiles: mine, Y's, and Z's; then no other car could proceed in my direction except Z's, and the only car heading in the opposite direction would surely be Y's. Instead, among the hundreds of cars that the night and the rain reduce to anonymous glimmers, only a motionless observer situated in a favorable position could distinguish one car from the other and perhaps recognize who is inside. This is the contradiction in which I find myself: if I want to receive a message I must give up being a message myself, but the message I want to receive from Y—namely, that Y has made herself into a message—has value only if I in turn am a message, and on the other hand the message I am has meaning only if Y doesn't limit herself to receiving it like any ordinary receiver of messages but if she also is that message I am waiting to receive from her.

By now to arrive in B, go up to Y's house, find that she has remained there with her headache brooding over the causes of our quarrel, would give me no satisfaction; if then Z were to arrive also a scene would be the result, histrionic and loathsome; and if instead I were to find out that Z has prudently stayed home or that Y didn't carry out her threat to telephone him, I would feel I had played the fool. On the other hand, if I had remained in A, and Y had gone there to apologize to me, I would have found myself in an embarrassing position: I would have seen Y through different eyes, a weak woman, clinging to me, and something between us would have changed. I can no longer accept any situation other than this transformation of ourselves into the messages of ourselves. And what about Z? Even Z must not escape our fate, he too must be transformed into the message of himself; it would be terrible if I were to run to Y jealous of Z and if Y were running to me, repentant, avoiding Z, while actually Z hasn't remotely thought of stirring from his house . . .

Halfway along the superhighway there is a service station. I stop, I run to the bar, I get a handful of change, I dial the B area code, then Y's number. No answer. I allow the rain of returned coins to pour down with joy: it's clear Y couldn't overcome her impatience, she got into her car, she has rushed

toward A. Now I have gone back to the superhighway, but on the other side: I too am rushing toward A. All the cars I pass could be Y, or else all the cars that pass me. On the opposite lane all the cars advancing in the other direction could be Z, in his self-delusion. Or else Y too has stopped at a service station, has telephoned my house in A; not finding me in she has realized I am going to B, she has turned around. Now we are speeding in opposite directions, moving away from each other, and the car I pass or that passes me is Z, who also tried telephoning Y at the halfway point.

Everything is more uncertain than ever but I feel I've now reached a state of inner serenity: as long as we can check our telephone numbers and there is no answer then we will continue, all three of us, speeding back and forth along these white lines, with no points of departure or of arrival to threaten with their sensations and meanings the single-mindedness of our race, freed finally from the awkward thickness of our persons and voices and moods, reduced to luminous signals, the only appropriate way of being for those who wish to be identified with what they say, without the distorting buzz our presence or the presence of others transmits to our messages.

To be sure, the price paid is high but we must accept it: to be indistinguishable from all the other signals that pass along this road, each with his meaning that remains hidden and undecipherable because outside of here there is no one capable of receiving us now and understanding us.

The Count of Monte Cristo

I

From my cell, I can say little about the construction of this Château d'If where I have been imprisoned for so many years. The tiny barred window is at the end of a shaft that pierces the thickness of the wall: it frames no view; from the greater or lesser luminosity of the sky I can recognize approximately the hours and the seasons; but I do not know if, beneath that window, there is the open sea or the ramparts or one of the inner courtyards of the fortress. The shaft narrows in the form of a chute; to look out I would have to advance, crawling, to the very end; I have tried, it is impossible, even for a man reduced, as I am, to a mere shadow. The opening perhaps is farther than it seems: estimation of the distance is confused by the funnel-like perspective and by the contrast of the light.

The walls are so thick they could contain other cells, stairways, casemates, and powder magazines; or else the fortress could be all wall, a full and compact solid, with one live man buried in the middle. The images you summon up when you are imprisoned follow one another without any reciprocal exclusion: the cell, the aperture, the corridors along which the jailer comes twice a day with the soup and the bread could be simply tiny pores in a rock of spongy consistency.

You hear the sea pounding, especially on stormy nights; at times it seems almost that the waves are breaking here against the very wall to which I put my ear; at times they seem to be digging below, under the rocks of the foundations, and my cell seems to be at the top of the tallest tower, and the rumble rises through the prison, a prisoner too, as in the horn of a conch shell.

I prick up my ears: the sounds describe variable, jagged spaces and forms around me. From the jailers' shuffling I try to establish the network of the corridors, the turns, the openings, the straight lines broken by the dragging of the kettle to the threshold of each cell and by the creak of the locks: I succeed only in fixing a succession of points in time, without any correspondence in space. At night the sounds become more distinct, but more uncertain in marking places and distances: somewhere a rat is gnawing, an ill man groans, a boat's siren announces its entry into the Marseilles roads, and Abbé Faria's spade continues digging its way among these stones.

I don't know how many times Abbé Faria has attempted to escape: each time he has worked for months prising up the stone slabs, crumbling the seams of mortar, perforating the rock with rudimentary awls; but at the moment when the pick's last blow should open his way to the rocky shore, he realizes he has come out in a cell that is even deeper in the fortress than the one from which he set out. It requires only a little error of calculation, a slight deviation in the incline of a tunnel and he is penetrating into the prison's viscera with no hope of finding his way again. After every failure, he goes back to correcting the plans and formulas with which he has frescoed the walls of his cell; he goes back to improving his arsenal of improvised tools; and then he resumes his scraping.

2

I too have thought and still think about a method of escape; in fact, I have made so many surmises about the topography of the fortress, about the shortest and surest way to reach the outer bastion and dive into the sea, that I can no longer distinguish between my conjectures and the data based on experience. Working with hypotheses, I can at times construct for myself such a minute and convincing picture of the fortress that in my mind I can move through it completely at my ease; whereas the elements I derive from what I see and what I hear are confused, full of gaps, more and more contradictory.

In the early days of my imprisonment, when my desperate acts of rebellion hadn't yet brought me to rot in this solitary cell, the routine tasks of prison life had caused me to climb up and down stairs and bastions, cross the entrance halls and posterns of the Château d'If; but from all the images retained by my memory, which now I keep arranging and rearranging in my conjectures, there is not one that fits neatly with another, none that helps explain to me the shape of the fortress or the point where I now am. Too many thoughts tormented me then—about how I, Edmond Dantès, poor but honest sailor, could have run afoul of the law's severity and suddenly lost my freedom—too many thoughts to allow my attention to concern itself with the plan of my surroundings.

The bay of Marseilles and its islands have been familiar to me since boyhood; and every embarkation of my not long life as a sailor, the departures and the arrivals, had this background; but the seaman's eye, every time it encounters the black fort of If, shifts away in an instinctive fear. So when they brought me here chained in a boat filled with gendarmes, and this cliff and the walls then loomed on the horizon, I understood my fate and bowed my head. I didn't see—or I don't remember—the pier where the boat docked, the steps they made me climb, the door that closed behind my back.

Now that, with the passage of years, I have stopped brooding over the chain of infamy and ill-luck that caused my imprisonment, I have come to understand one thing: the only way to escape the prisoner's state is to know how the prison is built.

If I feel no desire to imitate Faria, it is because the very knowledge that someone is seeking an avenue of escape is enough to convince me that such an avenue exists or, at least, that one can set himself the problem of seeking it. So the sound of Faria's digging has become a necessary complement to the concentration of my thoughts. I feel not only that Faria is a man attempting his own escape but also that he is a part of my plan; and not because I am hoping for an avenue to safety opened by him—he has been wrong so many times by now I have lost all faith in his intuition—but because the only information I have concerning this place where I am has come to me from the series of his mistakes.

3

The walls and the vaults have been pierced in every direction by the Abbé's pick, but his itineraries continue to wind around themselves like a ball of yarn, and he constantly goes through my cell as he follows, each time, a different course. He has long since lost his sense of orientation: Faria no longer recognizes the cardinal points, indeed he cannot recognize even the zenith and the nadir. At times I hear scratching at the ceiling; a rain of plaster falls on me; a breach opens; Faria's head appears, upside down. Upside down for me, not for him; he crawls out of his tunnel, he walks head down, while nothing about his person is ruffled, not his white hair, nor his beard green with mold, nor the tatters of sackcloth that cover his emaciated loins. He walks across the ceiling and the walls like a fly, he sinks his pick into a certain spot, a hole opens; he disappears.

Sometimes he has hardly disappeared through one wall when he pops out again from the wall opposite: he hasn't yet drawn his heel through the hole here when his beard is already appearing over there. He emerges again, more weary, skeletal, aged, as if years had passed since the last time I saw him.

At other times, however, he has hardly slipped into his tunnel when I hear him make the sound of a long aspiration like somebody preparing to sneeze loudly: in the labyrinth of the fortress there is much cold and damp; but the sneeze never comes. I wait: I wait for a week, for a month, for a year; Faria doesn't come back; I persuade myself he is dead. All of a sudden the wall opposite trembles as if shaken by an earthquake; from the shower of stones Faria looks out, completing his sneeze.

We exchange fewer and fewer words; or we continue conversations I cannot remember ever having begun. I realize Faria has trouble distinguishing one cell from another among the many he crosses in his mistaken journeys. Each cell contains a pallet, a pitcher, a wooden slops bucket, a man standing and looking at the sky through a narrow slit. When Faria appears from underground, the prisoner turns around: he always has the same face, the same voice, the same thoughts. His name is the same: Edmond Dantès. The fortress has no favored points: it repeats in space and time always the same combination of figures.

4

In all my hypotheses of escape, I try to imagine Faria as the protagonist. Not that I tend to identify myself with him: Faria necessarily plays his role so that I can mentally envisage my escape in an objective light, as I could not do if I were living it: I mean, dreaming it in the first person. By now I no longer know if the man I hear digging like a mole is the real Faria opening breaches in the walls of the real fortress of Château d'If or whether it is the hypothesis of a Faria dealing with a hypothetical fortress. It amounts to the same thing in any case: it is the fortress that wins. It is as if, in the contests between Faria and the fortress, I pressed my impartiality so far as to side with the fortress against him . . . no, now I am exaggerating: the contest does not take place only in my mind, but between two real contenders, independently of me; my efforts are directed toward seeing it with detachment, in a performance without anguish.

If I can come to observe fortress and Abbé from a perfectly equidistant point of view, I will be able to discern not only the particular errors Faria makes time after time, but also the error in method which continually defeats him and which I, thanks to my correct setting of the problem, will be able to avoid.

Faria proceeds in this way: he becomes aware of a difficulty, he studies a solution, he tries out the solution, encounters a new difficulty, plans a new solution, and so on and on. For him, once all possible errors and unforeseen elements are eliminated, his escape can only be successful: it all lies in planning and carrying out the perfect escape.

I set out from the opposite premise: there exists a perfect fortress, from which one cannot escape; escape is possible only if in the planning or building of the fortress some error or oversight was made.

While Faria continues taking the fortress apart, sounding out its weak points, I continue putting it back together, conjecturing more and more insuperable barriers.

The images of the fortress that Faria and I create are becoming more and more different: Faria, beginning with a simple figure, is complicating it extremely to include in it each of the single unforeseen elements he encounters in his path; I, setting out from the jumble of these data, see in each isolated obstacle the clue to a system of obstacles, I develop each segment into a regular figure, I fit these figures together as the sides of a solid, polyhedron or hyperpolyhedron, I inscribe these polyhedrons in spheres or hyperspheres, and so the more I enclose the form of the fortress the more I simplify it, defining it in a numerical relation or in an algebraic formula.

But to conceive a fortress in this way I need the Abbé Faria constantly combating landslides of rubble, steel bolts, sewers, sentry boxes, leaps into nothingness, recesses in the sustaining walls, because the only way to reinforce the imagined fortress is to put the real one continuously to the test.

5

Therefore: each cell seems separated from the outside only by the thickness of a wall, but Faria as he excavates discovers that in between there is always another cell, and between this cell and the outside, still another. The image I derive is this: a fortress that grows around us, and the longer we remain shut up in it the more it removes us from the outside. The Abbé digs, digs, but the walls increase in thickness, the battlements and the buttresses are multiplied. Perhaps if he can succeed in advancing faster than the fortress expands, Faria at a certain point will find himself outside unawares. It would be necessary to invert the relative speeds so that the fortress, contracting, would expel the Abbé like a cannonball.

But if the fortress grows with the speed of time, to escape one would have to move even faster, retrace time. The moment in which I would find myself outside would be the same moment I entered here: I look out on the bay at last, and what do I see? A boat full of gendarmes is landing at If; in the midst is Edmond Dantès, in chains.

There, I have gone back to imagining myself as the protagonist of the escape, and I have immediately risked not only my future but my past, my memories. Everything that is unclear in the relationship between an innocent prisoner and his prison continues to cast shadows on images and decisions. If the prison is surrounded by *my* outside, that outside would bring me back inside each time I succeeded in reaching it: the outside is nothing but the past, it is useless to try to escape.

I must conceive of the prison either as a place that is only inside itself without an outside—that is, giving up the idea of leaving it—or I must conceive of it not as *my* prison but as a place with no relation to me inside or outside; that is, I must study an itinerary from inside to outside that precludes the import that "inside" and "outside" have acquired in my emotions; valid, that is, even if instead of "outside" I say "inside" and vice versa.

6

If outside there is the past, perhaps the future is concentrated at the innermost point of the island of If, in other words the avenue of escape is an avenue toward the inside. In the graffiti with which Abbé Faria covers his walls, two maps with ragged outlines alternate, constellated with arrows and marks: one is meant to be the plan of If, the other of an island of the Tuscan archipelago where a treasure is hidden: Monte Cristo.

It is, in fact, to seek this treasure that Abbé Faria wants to escape. To succeed in his intention he has to draw a line that in the map of the island of If carries him from inside to outside and in the map of the

island of Monte Cristo carries him from outside to that point which is farther inland than all the other points, the treasure cave. Between an island he cannot leave and an island he cannot enter there must be a relation: therefore in Faria's hieroglyphics the two maps can be superimposed and are almost identical.

It is hard for me to understand whether Faria is now digging in order to dive into the open sea or to penetrate the cave full of gold. In either case, if one looks closely, he is tending toward the same point of arrival: the place of the multiplicity of possible things. At times I visualize this multiplicity as concentrated in a gleaming underground cavern, at times I see it as an irradiating explosion. The treasure of Monte Cristo and the escape from If are two phases of the same process, perhaps successive perhaps periodical as in a pulsation.

The search for the center of If-Monte Cristo does not lead to results that are more sure than those of the march toward its unreachable circumference: in whatever point I find myself the hypersphere stretches out around me in every direction; the center is all around where I am; going deeper means descending into myself. You dig and dig and you do nothing but retrace the same path.

7

Once he has come into possession of the treasure, Faria intends to liberate the Emperor from Elba, give him the means to put himself again at the head of his army . . . The plan of escape-search on the island of If-Monte Cristo is therefore not complete if it does not include also the search-escape of Napoleon from the island where he is confined. Faria digs; he penetrates once again into the cell of Edmond Dantès; he sees the prisoner from behind, looking as usual at the sky through the slit-window; at the sound of the pick the prisoner turns: it is Napoleon Bonaparte. Faria and Dantès-Napoleon together excavate a tunnel in the fortress. The map of If-Monte Cristo-Elba is drawn in such a way that by turning it a certain number of degrees the map of Saint Helena is obtained: the escape is reversed into an exile beyond return.

The confused reasons for which both Faria and Edmond Dantès were imprisoned have, in different ways, something to do with the Bonapartist cause. That hypothetical geometric figure called If-Monte Cristo coincides in certain of its points with another figure called Elba-Saint Helena. There are points of the past and of the future in which Napoleonic history intervenes in our poor prisoners' history, and other points where Faria and I can or could influence a possible return of the Empire.

These intersections make any calculation of predictions even more complicated; there are points where the line that one of us is following bifurcates, ramifies, fans out; each branch can encounter branches that set out from other lines. Along one jagged line Faria goes by, digging; and only a few seconds keep him from bumping into the baggage wagons and cannon of the Imperial Army reconquering France.

We proceed in the dark; only the way our paths twist upon themselves warns us that something has changed in the paths of the others. We may say that Waterloo is the point where the path of Wellington's army might intersect the path of Napoleon; if the two lines meet, the segments beyond that point are cut off; in the map where Faria digs his tunnel, the projection of the Waterloo angle forces him to turn back.

8

The intersections of the various hypothetical lines define a series of planes arranged like the pages of a manuscript on a novelist's desk. Let us call Alexandre Dumas the writer who must deliver to his publisher as soon as possible a novel in twelve volumes entitled *The Count of Monte Cristo*. His work proceeds in this fashion: two assistants (Auguste Maquet and P. A. Fiorentino) develop one by one the

various alternatives that depart from each single point, and they furnish Dumas with the outline of all the possible variants of an enormous supernovel; Dumas selects, rejects, cuts, pastes, interposes; if a given solution is preferred for well-founded reasons but omits an episode he would find it useful to include, he tries to put together the stub-ends of disparate provenance, he joins them with makeshift links, racks his brain to establish an apparent continuity among divergent segments of future. The final result will be the novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* to be handed to the printer.

The diagrams Faria and I draw on the walls of the prison resemble those Dumas pens on his papers to establish the order of the chosen variants. One bundle of sheets of paper can already be passed for printing: it contains the Marseilles of my youth; moving over the closely written lines I can fight my way onto the docks of the harbor, climb up the Rue de la Canebière in the morning sun, reach the Catalan village perched on the hill, see Mercedes again . . . Another bundle of papers is awaiting the final touches: Dumas is still revising the chapters of the imprisonment in the Château d'If; Faria and I are struggling inside there, ink-stained, in a tangle of revisions ... At the edges of the desk there are piles of paper, the suggestions for the story's continuation which the two assistants are methodically compiling. In one of them, Dantès escapes from prison, finds Faria's treasure, transforms himself into the Count of Monte Cristo with his ashen, impassive face, devotes his implacable will and his boundless wealth to revenge; and the Machiavellian Villefort, the greedy Danglars, the grim Caderousse pay the price of their foul deeds; just as, for so many years among these walls, I had foreseen in my angry daydreams, in my longings for revenge.

Beside this, other sketches for the future are arranged on the desk. Faria opens a breach in the wall, bursts into the study of Alexandre Dumas, casts an impartial dispassionate look on the expanse of pasts and presents and futures—as I could not do, I who would try to recognize myself with tenderness in the young Dantès just promoted to his captaincy, with pity in the imprisoned Dantès, with delirious grandeur in the Count of Monte Cristo who makes his regal entrance into the proudest salons of Paris; I who in their place would find with dismay so many strangers—Faria takes a page here, a page there, like a monkey he moves his long hairy arms, hunts for the escape chapter, the page without which all the possible continuations of the novel outside the fortress become impossible. The concentric fortress, If-Monte Cristo-Dumas's desk, contains us prisoners, the treasure, and the supernovel *Monte Cristo* with its variants and combinations of variants in the nature of billions of billions but still in a finite number. Faria has set his heart on one page among the many, and he does not despair of finding it; I am interested in seeing the accumulation of rejected sheets increase, the solutions which need not be taken into account, which already form a series of piles, a wall . . .

Arranging one after the other all the continuations which allow the story to be extended, probable or improbable as they may be, you obtain the zigzag line of the *Monte Cristo* of Dumas; whereas connecting the circumstances that prevent the story from continuing you outline the spiral of a novel in negative, a *Monte Cristo* preceded by the minus sign. A spiral can wind upon itself toward the inside or toward the outside: if it twists toward the inside of itself, the story closes without any possible development; if it turns in widening curves it could, at every turn, include a segment of the *Monte Cristo*with the plus sign, finally coinciding with the novel Dumas will give to the printer, or perhaps even surpassing it in its wealth of lucky chances. The decisive difference between the two books—sufficient to cause one to be defined as true and the other as false, even if they are identical—lies entirely in the method. To plan a book—or an escape—the first thing to know is what to exclude.

9

And so we go on dealing with the fortress, Faria sounding out the weak points of the wall and coming up against new obstacles, I reflecting on his unsuccessful attempts in order to conjecture new outlines of walls to add to the plan of my fortress-conjecture.

If I succeed in mentally constructing a fortress from which it is impossible to escape, this conceived fortress either will be the same as the real one—and in this case it is certain we shall never escape from here, but at least we will achieve the serenity of one who knows he is here because he could be nowhere else—or it will be a fortress from which escape is even more impossible than from here—and this, then, is a sign that here an opportunity of escape exists: we have only to identify the point where the imagined fortress does not coincide with the real one and then find it.